

## WORKING CREDO

"I put the images in order. It becomes an order. And each image is put next to another, is fitted into a pattern. Becomes an addition."

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## CONFIDENCE IN SIMPLICITY

"It's a matter of having confidence in simplicity, in every single minute, in time as it passes." Extensive interview with Leth.

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## THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS

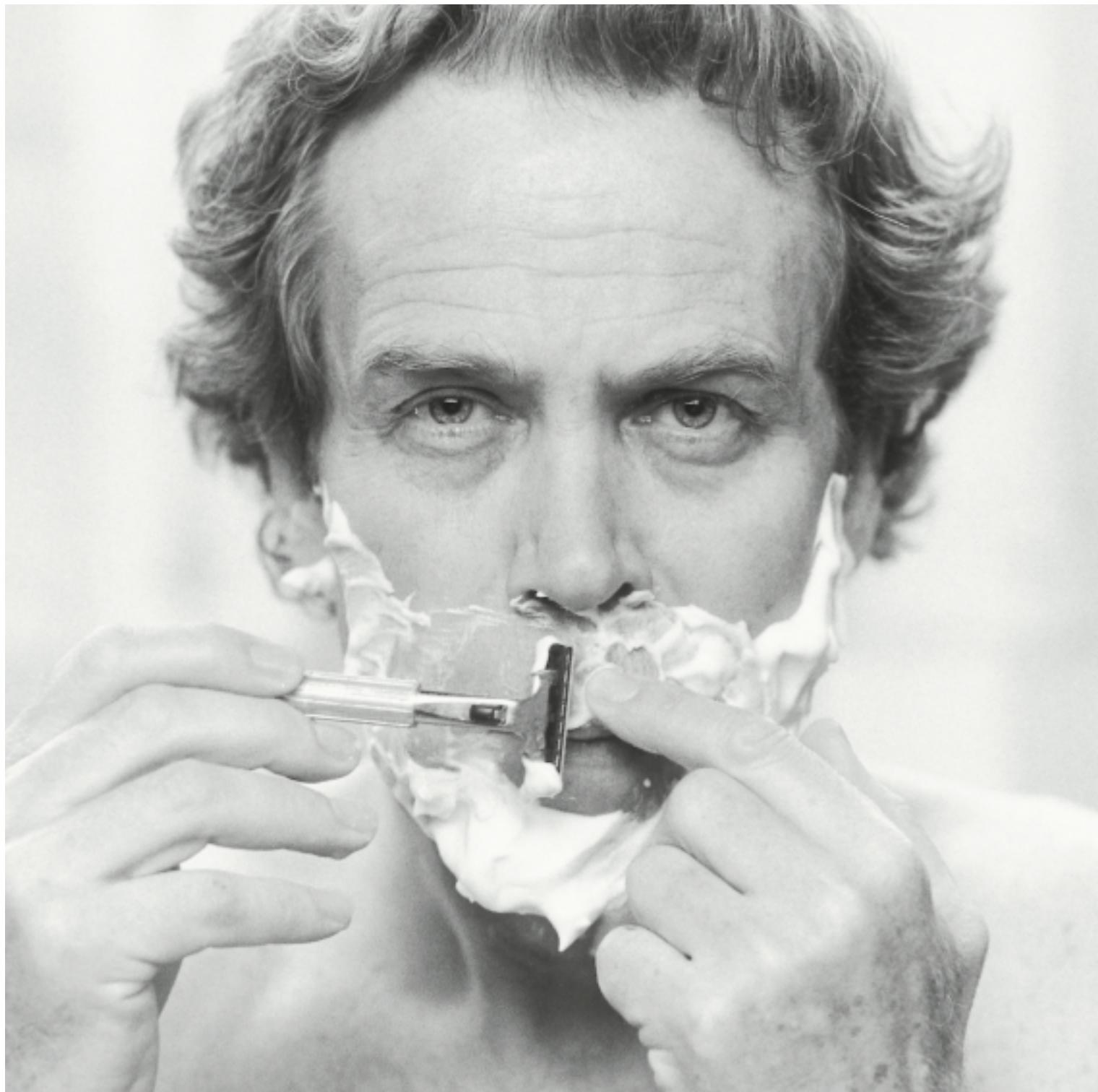
Lars von Trier set up five obstructions challenging Jørgen Leth to 'remake' central parts of his filmic oeuvre under creative pressure from Trier's prohibitions.

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# SPECIAL  
ISSUE/LETH

FILM IS PUBLISHED BY THE DANISH FILM INSTITUTE



# FILM

SPECIAL ISSUE / LETH



Front page: From Notes on Love.  
Jørgen Leth. Photo: Vibke Winding

## FILM \* SPECIAL ISSUE /LETH

FILM is published by the Danish Film Institute. There are 8 issues per year. On the occasion of the Jørgen Leth Retrospective in New York 2002 the DFI have produced a FILM\*Special Issue / LETH in English.

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# WORKING CREDO

## THIS IS MY WORKING-CREDO, WHICH STILL HOLDS

Film is a series of images put together. Not a sequence, not a story, but a series of images, nothing more. The order of the images is less important than the single image. The final consequence of that assertion is that the images may be put together blindfolded. That their order may be determined by means of rules that make allowance for a strong element of chance. Like William Burroughs, I consider chance a great inspiration. I allow chance some leeway in my films, during shootings, but often during editing, too. In various ways, I invite chance to join in the game.

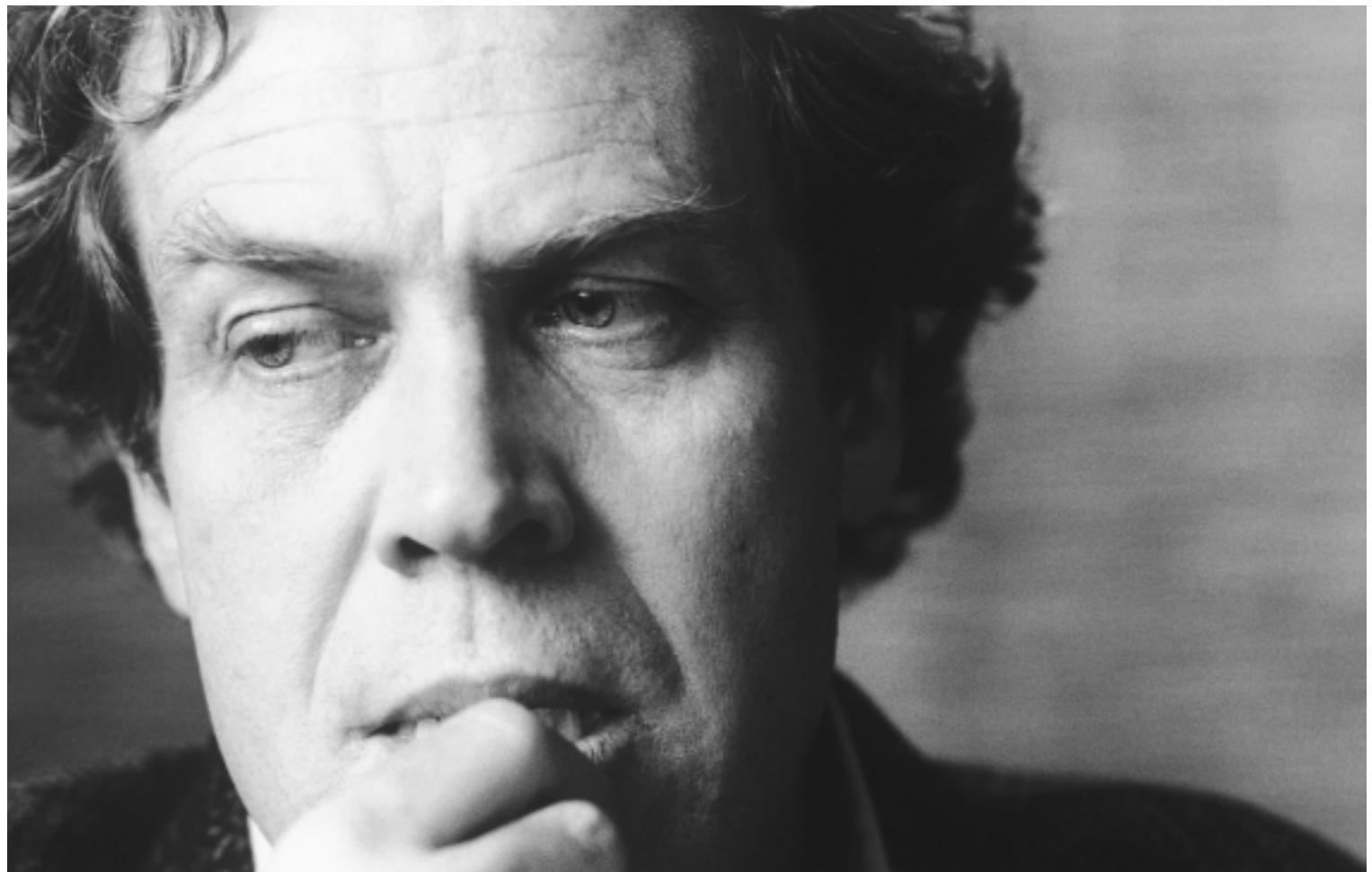
Rules provide an important working principle for me. I invent rules. A new set for each film – most often with the purpose of delimitating my technical possibilities. What the camera is allowed to do, and what it is not. What the editing can do, and what it cannot. This restrictive discipline is of crucial importance to my work. It is like making mental optics with which things and events in life may be viewed in a particular way. It is a way to create order out of chaos. It is a frame, a Golden Section that focuses and elaborates segments within brief instants of time.

And when everything is in place, the rules are plain and fixed, then the attitude is: Let's see

what happens, e.g. *66 Scenes from America*, *Life in Denmark*, *Motion Picture*. A series of images – that's what it is. Each image has its story. Each image is a brief instant of time, framed. Time flows through the image with an effortless ease. We observe every motion, hear every sound.

It's like that. I put the images in order. It becomes an order. And each image is put next to another, is fitted into a pattern. Becomes an addition. ■

Jørgen Leth



*Notes on love* - Photo: Vibeke Winding

# IT'S A MATTER OF HAVING CONFIDENCE

by METTE HJORT and IB BONDEBJERG.  
Chapter from "The Danish Directors - Dialogues on a Contemporary National Cinema" (Intellect Books, 2001)

**HJORT:** You're an unusually versatile figure. Not only do your films span a number of genres, your career as a whole embraces a wide variety of activities. Indeed, in your case, one is almost tempted to speak of a series of parallel, yet interconnected careers. You've published numerous volumes of poetry and essays. When you were in your twenties you worked for *Aktuelt* and *Politiken* as a journalist with a special interest in jazz, sports, film and theatre. More recently, you've become a much-loved national figure as a result of your unique commentaries on the Tour de France for Danish TV and radio. One thing you cannot lay claim to, however, is formal training in the art of filmmaking. How exactly did you get started as a filmmaker?

**LETH:** I started writing early on. I'd worked as a journalist and had written poetry before I made my first films, but I'd always thought a lot in images. This is clear already in my first collection of poetry, *Yellow Light*, published in 1962. Poetry is often visual, and my poetry is particularly visual. So mentally it wasn't much of a shift for me to start making films. I had some good friends, with whom I collaborated artistically, and we simply agreed that we would make a film. At the same time we had a very intense relation to various cinematic conventions and wanted to change things. We wanted to simplify things. That in a sense is an idea that has motivated much of my work in film; I wanted to work very directly with the medium, just as one does when writing poetry. I wanted to avoid the technical traps, to avoid giving centre stage to technolog. In some ways there's a direct parallel here with today's Dogme concept. We threw ourselves into our first film, which we financed ourselves; in fact, we did absolutely everything ourselves. We borrowed equipment

and made a virtue of every necessity; the fact that we simply couldn't produce synchronic sound became a virtue. We recorded the images and sound separately. The film is called *Stop for Bud* and we made it in 1963. That was my first film and it gets around. It's distributed worldwide by a French distributor and was made in the context of a congenial artists' collective consisting of Ole John, Jens Jørgen Thorsen and myself.

The next film, *Look Forward to a Time of Security* was even more radical, from a purely formal point of view. I made it together with Ole John, in Spain, where I was living at the time. We simply put images and sound together in the most incongruous ways, transgressing every manner of cinematic convention. That, then, was our first attempt to develop a quite different take on film form, and it was to a certain extent an education in itself. We simply made the film and knew only what we felt we needed to know about film technique. At the same time I was writing for the Danish daily *Aktuelt* and had the occasion to interview Antonioni, Godard, Bo Widerberg and a series of Danish directors, so film journalism was also part of my cinematic education. The films had an impact on my poetry, and my entire career has been marked by a certain interaction between writing poetry and making films.

In 1966 we had the opportunity to make a professionally produced film, *The Perfect Human*. It was a great success, won a number of prizes at festivals, received the Danish Bodil-award and any number of other awards. I suppose one might say that it provided the entry ticket to making films on professional terms. As a result I've simply skipped all formal film training, but the ironic point is that I did apply to the National Film School of Denmark

# OF HAVING IN SIMPLICITY



*Good and Evil* - Photo: Henning Camre



a couple of years later, unsuccessfully. By then I'd already made at least five films, but I was gently refused. The argument was that I already knew the craft of making films and therefore would be too overwhelming a presence among the other students. I was actually rather relieved to hear this!

**HJORT:** You're one of Denmark's most important documentary filmmakers and many previous interviews and critical discussions have focused on the precise nature of your documentary practice. Some critics have described your documentaries as lyrical, and you yourself have repeatedly underscored the importance of a kind of 'ethnographic wonder', as well as your desire, not to prove a particular point, but rather to show realities in an open-ended and thought-provoking manner. At times, the documentary spaces you create seem designed to provoke certain alienation effects. I'm thinking, for example, of your use of song lyrics to comment on the utterances of the hippies in Nepal, who figure centrally in *Near Heaven, Near Earth*. In Tómas Gislason's masterful documentary about you and your work, *From Heart to Hand (Fra hjertet til hånden)*, you equate Jean-Luc Godard with poetry, and François Truffaut with prose. Is your view on the tasks and challenges of documentary filmmaking shaped by Godard, and thus also, indirectly, by Brecht?

**LETH:** I'm glad you've included the reference back to Brecht, for it's true that he had an enormous influence on Godard and therefore also indirectly on me. In the 1960s I often felt that Godard and I were travelling along parallel trajectories. I've never, with the exception of the interview I did with him, exchanged thoughts with Godard or known him as a colleague or friend, but I've always loved his films and I've taught courses based on his work at the Danish Film School. I've also written about Godard's films – *My Life to Live (Vivre sa vie)* and not least *Two or Three Things I Know About Her (Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle)* – describing his pseudo-anthropological approach to reality, which is also my own. It's a question here of adopting a stance towards reality that is marked by wonder, questioning and to some extent naïveté, while at the same time adopting a stance towards film that makes possible a probing, analytic and experimental relation to the language of film and its capacity to describe reality. This is the same kind of Verfremdung we find in Brecht and the idea is that language in itself, the very way of posing

the questions, is important. Although Godard has been a key source of inspiration, the influence of, for example, Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp has been at least as important. I often feel that I've been inspired primarily by developments in the other arts, typically painting or music. During the early 1970s I worked closely with some Danish painters, including Per Kirkeby. So developments in painting, the modes of perception associated with painting, have been very important to me, and if the artist Duchamp has been important to me, so has the composer, John Cage. Cage's philosophy of emptiness, the way he utilizes temporal duration, have left definite traces in my films. It's a matter of having confidence in simplicity, in every single minute, in time as it passes. I like the long take, where the contemplation of time and events within a single frame goes on for quite a while.

**HJORT:** In 1970 you co-directed *The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest* with the important Danish painter, Per Kirkeby. The film is a visually remarkable exploration of the changing faces of a park that occupies a unique place in Danish culture. Could you describe the nature of the collaboration in question? I'm interested, of course, in the ways in which a painterly perspective might have shaped the visual language of the film.

**LETH:** Kirkeby and I were friends and artistically we had a lot in common. We worked together as part of the artists' collective, ABCinema, in the beginning of the 1970s. The driving force in that context was the idea that artists from different schools and from across the arts should be able to make films together. I was invited to make the film about the Deer Garden and it seemed perfectly natural to ask Per Kirkeby to be part of the project. The reason I wanted him to be part of it was that, art historically, he is anchored in and has a tremendous passion for romanticism and the Danish Golden Age (1). And it seemed to me that the Danish Golden Age provided an excellent aesthetic angle on the Deer Garden. From a compositional point of view we thought of the Deer Garden in terms of a series of large Golden Age paintings, and the depiction of the seasons is also inspired by a Golden Age aesthetic. There's a great deal of stillness in the film and at certain points the romantic conception of things finds vivid expression.

**HJORT:** You studied literature and anthropology at the Universities of Århus and Copenhagen, and your films are in many ways

dialogues with key anthropological thinkers. I'm thinking, of course, of *Notes on Love*, which includes a sequence that situates your filming of primarily Melanesian women within the context of Malinowski's work on the Trobriand islands just North East of Papua New Guinea. You point out that Malinowski was working here some seventy years earlier, that his project at that time was 'to describe love' and that he is your 'hero'. *Notes on Love* even includes images of black and white photographs taken by Malinowski. Most contemporary anthropologists associate Malinowski with positivistic beliefs, and favour instead some version of anti-realist anthropology, which remains sceptical about our ability ever to grasp the truth of a foreign culture. At times, you seem closer to this kind of literary anthropology, which foregrounds the poetic, writerly activities of the anthropologist, than you do to the realist anthropological theories of Malinowski. Could you talk about your relation to Malinowski, and your self-understanding as an anthropologist?

**LETH:** I see anthropology and especially Malinowski as tools that I can use in my films; they provide a kind of aesthetic attitude. The point is by no means to establish myself as a disciple of Malinowski, or something like that. What fascinates me about Malinowski is his use of language and the distance – the very precise distance – he establishes in relation to his subject matter. A lot has happened in anthropology since then and I'm interested in people like Michel Foucault, whom I've also read, but I can't use his work in the same way, although his ideas are perhaps closer to my own way of thinking than Malinowski's are. I sometimes refer to Foucault in my manuscripts. However, I can use Malinowski. I can use his way of seeing and I find the very idea of describing sexuality as a phenomenon deeply inspiring. So I keep going back to his major work, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, which in some ways is my bible, not on account of its propositional content, but on account of its method. What moves me is his almost naive relation to what he describes. His straightforwardness and way of describing things make him the romantic incarnation of the anthropologist sitting in a tent and looking at the natives. That approach has been deeply inspiring throughout my work. I've wanted to be someone who looks upon life with a sense of wonder, someone who somehow asks the most awkward questions. We're dealing here

with an aesthetic attitude rather than some position in anthropology. I have a frivolous relation to anthropology. I simply use it as a tool. My references to Malinowski go all the way back to *Life in Denmark*. That is, when I line up the women in that film, I'm drawing on Malinowski. Indeed, there's a hidden reference to Malinowski; it's almost a citation. The subtitle reads 'Women from a Provincial Town', and both the composition and title recall Malinowski.

**HJORT:** The concept of the exotic seems to be central to your conception of documentary film. Why?

**LETH:** I'm very interested in making the banal exotic. A good example is *Life in Denmark*, where I try to view the familiar with a stranger's eyes, try to adopt an analytic stance towards what is most natural, obvious and mundane. That's the aim, what I try to discipline my mind into achieving. In a way I attempt to charge the most obvious reality with meaning. When I write poetry, for example, I may determine that everything is a matter of choice, even the possibility of ruling out certain options. My approach has frequently been to rent a summerhouse somewhere and to isolate myself entirely from everyday obligations and in order simply to

**"I am perhaps related to the romantics in that I believe that it is possible to describe the things we see so simply and realistically, and at the same time so intensely, that they become charged and enchanted."**

sit and describe the most immediate view: what I can see on my table or through the window. The driving force here has been my conviction that reality can be charged that way, can be somehow re-enchanted, to use an old-fashioned romantic term. I am perhaps related to the romantics in that I believe that it is possible to describe the things we see so simply and realistically, and at the same time so intensely, that they become charged and enchanted. I think this method makes possible a certain transcendence, to speak a little mystically. It's possible to adopt a certain perspective on reality, which changes it and allows it to be viewed with a sense of profound ethnographic wonder. In this way the most obvious realities are called into question as everything is dissected in an almost experimental manner, andreassembled in new ways. These are the ideas

that have motivated many of my more experimental films, from *Life in Denmark* to *Good and Evil*. In those films it was a matter of removing things from their normal contexts and placing them in an empty room where they could be scrutinized.

**HJORT:** Many of your films have focused on Danes and Denmark. In films such as *Dancing Bournonville* and *Peter Martins: A Dancer* you provide a cinematic interpretation and record of outstanding moments in the cultural life of the nation. In *Life in Denmark* you isolate some of the driving concerns of ordinary Danes. Films like *Ophelia's Flowers* and *The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest* are lyrical explorations of aspects of a specifically Danish nature. Could you talk a little about the intended audience for these national films? Are these films directed primarily at a national public, or at an international audience? Lurking behind these questions is the issue that is at the heart of current debates about the future of Danish film: are international audiences interested primarily in that which is always already international, or rather, in that which is experienced as other, as different?

**LETH:** I rarely think of the audience when I make my films. That's perhaps a point of view that few would share, but I really don't think about the audience. The same is true when I write poetry. I don't think about the reader. This sounds coquettish, but it's actually true. That is, if I'm interested in something, if the subject matter interests me enough to make a film about it, then I simply make the film and assume that someone will want to see it. My view more generally is that not all films necessarily have to have a large audience just as a poetry collection can't have lots and lots of readers, compared to novels. At the same time it's clear that poetry is important, and perhaps even necessary if literature is to survive. It has an inherent power to inspire people and retain its vitality across time. The same is true of film, in my view. This, ideally, is how I like to see things. I think that there's an unfortunate tendency to focus on what in the television business is called 'viewer ratings' and to measure films in terms of their box office success. I do, of course, realize that film is different from poetry in that films cost money, but since we are fortunate enough to have a system that legally guarantees the development of film art in Denmark, I think it's important to make the films one wants to make, without thinking in terms of what may or may not be

popular. That's my alibi for making films and my political position on questions of cultural production. It's important to be able to make films in much the same way that poetry is written. That is, it's important to be able to experiment with the language of film, to question cinematic conventions, constantly, so that the language of film can be revitalized by means of a probing and experimental stance.

As far as the relation between the national and the international is concerned, I would want to say that I've been fortunate enough to see my films appreciated abroad. My films' success at festivals, that is, in the eyes of a discriminating audience, has in part enabled me to continue making films in Denmark. If my films were to be measured in terms only of how many viewers see them in the cinema, and that kind of thing, everything would quickly grind to a halt. However, it happens to be the case that Denmark has had a wonderful distribution system for documentary and experimental films. In this sense the Danish Film Institute is really a kind of popular library for documentary film; it's had the effect of making these films very accessible, and they're in fact much more widely utilized and viewed than most people happen to think. Many of my films have been shown in cinemas and were made in cinema format, that is, 35 mm. As a result their chances of being shown at festivals have been good and many of them have been internationally distributed. If we focus on the concept of international film, I have to say that I go to the cinema less and less, and feel less and less satisfied by the experience when I finally do. The kind of hybrid product that can be referred to as an 'international production' is of course the most boring thing imaginable. We're talking about a product of the most average quality, the result of any number of dramaturgical deliberations, market analyses and so on. I don't believe in the idea of aiming at that kind of film. A market is of course a market; that can't be denied, but I also believe that there's something called film art, which has its own conditions of development, its own imperatives and trajectories, which run parallel to the market mechanisms or depart from them entirely. Luckily of course, some films are great art and at the same time good entertainment – and successfull. I like for example the work of Scorsese, Tarantino, Ang Lee and Michael Mann.

**HJORT:** You're intensely interested in love



*The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest* - Photo: Henning Camre



and, by your own admission, a great lover of women. Yet, the view on love that emerges in, for example, *Notes on Love* is anything but the standard, romantic conception. In this film the viewer witnesses a series of sequences in which a man examines the face of a woman, not gently and with compassion, but in an almost unbearably clinical, dispassionate and self-absorbed manner. The solipsistic and unilateral nature of the interactions is fully expressed in the following statements, which are made by one of the men, and repeated in a subsequent sequence: 'I can tell you very clearly what I'm doing to you. I'm holding you in my arms. I'm kissing you. I'm pressing your body against my body and won't let you go. That's what I'm doing to you.' Are you, in fact, deeply doubtful of romantic conceptions of love? If not, then what, exactly, were you trying to convey with these sequences?

**LETH:** That's a difficult question to answer because making that film was almost like writing a poem; I'd almost want to say that it was made instinctively. It's actually hard for me to interpret the film, to say exactly what I wanted to convey with it. It's a *film cru* in the sense that it almost spells itself through its material. I'm fascinated with this idea of performing an action while at the same time observing myself doing it. There's a kind of 'schizophrenia', if you will, which is perhaps part of life too - in both my poetry and my films. It's a matter of intensely observing the most basic activities while also engaging in a form of self-scrutiny. This self-reflexivity was very extreme at that particular point in time, because I was at a certain stage in my life; I was very introverted and my descriptions of love in that film are almost macabre; they're like dissections. However, if you look at my poetry, you'll find a lot of erotic images. I actually think that it's primarily the tone that's different in that film and in my poetry. I'm driven to describe with great precision what I see, what I feel, what I observe myself - and others - doing. This motivating force is almost like placing a magnifying glass in front of the eye in order to observe reality, both feelings and their expression; but it's also a matter of expressing a very frightening depth that is part of love's essence. This approach is perhaps extraordinarily clinical and observational compared with ordinary forms of acting, but I think that many of the actors with whom I worked felt that the experience in question was unique. The actors had to be completely

naked, both literally and metaphorically, and this involved delving deep into themselves in search of certain resources, since my stance towards them was almost ethnographic. My aim was to try to transfer the ethnographic perspective from a really exotic and distant world to a proximate world, to our own, thereby transforming the realities into ethnographic objects. The idea behind the film was to turn love into an ethnographic object; in itself a powerful thought. I was in a very particular state of mind when I made *Notes on Love*, and I wanted to proceed in a really radical way, which has made it one of my most extreme films. It was actually intended to be more ironic, more lighthearted, but it ended up becoming a very dark film. But I'm very pleased with it, because while I was making it I felt I was carrying out the project as a kind of personal experiment. I wanted to peel away everything that was superfluous, to remove everything that might sweeten the film or make it gentler, more comprehensible, if you will. In that sense the film is as dark as a poem, I think. I was also delighted to work together with Per Kirkeby.

**HJORT:** The concept of narrative occupies a central role in both your art and your life. In *Haiti Express* you foreground the issue of narrative in a series of voice-over statements that thematise the difficulties involved in beginning a story. You've frequently talked about your love of Haiti in terms of narrative. Your claim has been that in Haiti you're constantly in the thick of unfolding stories, the beginnings and ends of which seem mysterious and obscure. A narrative, for you, is clearly something quite different from the rational construction with a beginning, middle and end that Aristotle envisaged. What, exactly, is your view on narrative, in art and life?

**LETH:** The question becomes quite powerful when you mention both art and life. I think of myself as a storyteller. I won't pretend otherwise, but I don't tell stories in the way that is expected. I've exploded that particular narrative mode in my films, and I've done so on purpose. First of all because I rarely have what might be called a 'message' in my documentary films. There's rarely something I absolutely want to prove, and I've never been tempted to tell stories in a conventional way. I do on the other hand find it inspiring to work with narrative if I can use a certain aesthetic method as a starting point. In *Haiti Express*, which you refer to, I take on the question of

narrative directly. I construct the narrative in such a way that we don't know where it leads or ends. In so doing I turn the very form of the feature film, the narrative, into a game. It's a matter of playing with the concept of reality, of never hiding the scaffolding or techniques and of making them manifest instead. At this point I find *Haiti Express* a satisfying film. It was brutally received when it first appeared and for many years I was very hurt by the negative responses it received and I didn't see it again for a very long time. In recent years I've seen it on several occasions with quite different people and I'm really quite pleased with what I did with it. My aim in *Haiti Express* was to work with a collapsible fiction that we moved around in reality. That is, I had some actors whom I wanted to place in some real situations, and then I wanted to write up the scenes based on those situations.

I'd obviously made up my mind about a lot of things in advance, and I had lists of the scenes I wanted to shoot, but much of the time the actors were simply placed within a given chunk of reality, where they were expected to make sense of their stories. *Haiti Express'* story was developed on a set that was real. This

**"I've always felt that it was more exciting to undertake something that was difficult and challenging, something that wasn't that straightforward or easy to grasp."**

was true merely as a result of choosing Haiti, whereas the producer had a clear preference for a more controllable location. He suggested Guadeloupe or Martinique, but I was fascinated by the idea of Haiti, quite simply because Haiti was a banana republic, full of strange and surprising things, a surreal political reality. It's a question of letting yourself be challenged. I've always felt that it was more exciting to undertake something that was difficult and challenging, something that wasn't that straightforward or easy to grasp. That's why I've never written a complete script. I don't think it's interesting simply to reproduce a script on film. I think it's more exciting to work with some sketches, which can then be developed in relation to actual circumstances. Real circumstances are very important to me, tremendously inspiring. There's this sense of having some sketches, some angles, and also some narrative elements, which can then be moved around and played with. I like to retain

that kind of openness in the actual process of making a given film.

There are aspects of *Haiti Express* that I find gratifying. For example, the interview with Roberto D'Aubuisson in El Salvador in the beginning. Arranging that took some doing. He was after all an incredibly dangerous man, the leader of the death squads and so on. It was a coup that we managed to arrange that interview. In fact, we conducted it under false cover, as a TV crew from Denmark, but we used 35 mm film. We managed to get access to him and we'd consulted some of our most expert colleagues before the interview, Raymond Bonner from The New York Times and Chris Dickey from The Washington Post. We'd asked them what we should ask D'Aubuisson. They suggested that we should ask the most probing questions. Was he behind the murder of the four nuns? Had he ordered the murder of archbishop Romero? And so on. The task in question was a very, very unusual one for an actor. Imagine this Danish actor who shows up and has to try to be a journalist. However, Henning Jensen did a wonderful job of his role and once he'd taken four valium pills on the way to the interview he asked those questions in a terrifying atmosphere, surrounded by bodyguards and so on. I'm very proud of the fact that we were able to work so directly with reality.

Here we have that concept I want to propose, the idea of collapsible fictions, fictions that you can somehow unpack and unfold; and then the story simply continues. I do after all tell a story, a rudimentary one perhaps. It's an old existential story about a journalist in this case, who somehow loses himself, loses his identity or his sense of self in a reality that becomes less and less perspicuous. This is a well-known literary plot and I don't make any effort to complicate it. However, every single scene, on the other hand, interests me enormously, or rather, every scene is a story in itself. Actually, it's really a matter of a series of tableaux that have been arranged contrastively, but everything in the film is real, including the interview with the minister towards the end, and I'm very proud of that. I had requested an interview with the Minister of Information and Jean Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier, but we were told that they wouldn't be able to meet with us, although they'd be happy to answer our questions. Therefore I sent in written questions and we got written answers back. So that's the dialogue in the

scene; we're actually using the Haitian government's responses.

**HJORT:** You've made a series of documentary films about larger-than-life figures, individuals whose extraordinary natural gifts are matched only by their intense ambition to realise this potential fully. I have in mind, clearly, your bicycle trilogy – *Stars and Watercarriers*, *The Impossible Hour*, *A Sunday in Hell* – and *Peter Martins: A Dancer*. You've frequently expressed contempt for the small-minded nature of certain typically Danish attitudes. In Denmark a radical, anti-authoritarian commitment to equality leads easily to a dogmatic and debilitating refusal of excellence and its enriching influence. Your position, quite clearly, is that the quality of our lives can only be enhanced, not diminished, through contact with exceptionally gifted persons. The lives led by these individuals embody, somehow, some of the very moral sources and virtues that we, in our inept ways, are constantly struggling to contact. Are the films in question an extended meditation on the virtues of certain forms of distinction and hierarchy, as compared to misguided interpretations of equality?

**LETH:** Yes, your question articulates much of what can be extrapolated from those films. When I make films about great figures, wonderful, brilliant performers, it is because I feel a certain fascination. Frequently my starting point is a kind of polemic against dominant tendencies of the time. In the 1960s I made *The Perfect Human*, which in itself is a kind of polemic against imperfection, the cultivation of mediocrity. The sports films were made during the same period in which I wrote my sports poems. The latter were controversial in 1967 because they cultivated the sportsman as a hero, as a model, as someone who's capable of moving us. A great sports performance is like theatre, where we can see the qualities of our lives explosively displayed in purified form, which in turn enables us to situate ourselves in relation to our ideals. Outstanding sports accomplishments resemble Greek theatre, where all kinds of characters and traits were put on expressive display – heroes, villains, virtue and vice. We owe it to the great performers to respect them for this aspect of what they do. At the same time, my interest has been in the mechanisms underwriting the accomplishments of these particular individuals. My stance, once again, has been an anthropological one involving curiosity about how the

various elements fit together. It's not enough, in my mind, simply to admire a given achievement. My aim is to ask how and why. What does the workshop of Peter Martins, the dancer, look like? I'm interested in peering inside and the film is very much driven by my own curiosity. That is, there's something that I myself want to know.

I knew absolutely nothing about ballet when I first started working on the Martins film, but I was fascinated by his charisma, by what he was able to give us. What I saw in Martins, which is also what I saw in the sports heroes, was the charisma, the ability to facilitate or transmit certain experiences. These kinds of experiences are transcendental; the experience of a great performance is something that enriches our lives. That's why we congregate around it, but my stance involves describing the work that goes into these performances. My aim is to penetrate and reveal what it is exactly that the performers do, the mechanisms underwriting their accomplishments. I maintain admiration

**"I'm deeply fascinated by the relation between word and image, which I've explored in various ways from one film to the next, using commentators, that is, voice over, but also subtitles. In my mind word and image needn't go together."**

and respect as my starting point. But my aim in the films has been to explain, to reveal, to examine, to get to the heart of the relevant processes, in order perhaps to enhance our understanding of them. I'm not motivated by moralising intentions. I simply want to explain something. However, it's true that there's a polemical dimension, a response to the perhaps very Danish cultivation of mediocrity, which I find disturbing and sterile.

**HJORT:** Some of your documentary films experiment interestingly with the relation between word and image. I'm thinking, for example, of *66 Scenes from America*, which presents a series of almost hyper-real, postcard-like images of America, that are identified, in a series of significantly delayed, laconic and minimalist comments. The longest sequence is that of Andy Warhol fastidiously eating a hamburger. Having completed this exercise, Warhol delivers the following line: 'My name is Andy Warhol and I just finished eating a hamburger.' What, exactly, is the purpose of the intentionally strained and awkward relation between images and words in *66 Scenes from America*?



Top: *A Sunday in Hell* - Photo: DFI Library / Bottom: *A Sunday in Hell* - framegrap

**LETH:** I'm delighted you've noted the delays and timing, because that's a powerful element in the film. I'm fascinated by the relation between word and image, which I've explored in various ways from one film to the next, using commentators, that is, voice over, but also subtitles. In my mind word and image needn't go together. I'm interested in how the individual image is perceived or read. This goes back to my fascination with the fact that films consist of several separate elements: sound, image and

**"As far as the film's text is concerned, I became fascinated by the fact that the very gesture of providing information can have the effect of categorising an image."** (*About 66 Scenes from America*)

text. I'm fascinated by the possibility of pushing the way in which the image is read in different directions. For example, by placing the music in unexpected places, which is something I do

a lot, sometimes following stochastic principles. The principle of chance is very important to me. That's frequently how I make a decision and I often leave it to the film's editor to organise the various elements into a sequence. The concept of a sequence is entirely arbitrary as far as I'm concerned. I never insist on a specific sequence of scenes. In fact, I can easily imagine throwing them all into a box and retrieving them at random. I did precisely that in several of my films. *66 Scenes from America* is typical in that respect. The material is organised following different concepts. There are landscapes in which one sees a house, there are flags, there are people. That's how I organised the material and after that it was the principle of chance that determined the order in which the categories appeared. As far as the film's text is concerned, I became fascinated by the fact that the very gesture of providing information can have the effect of categorising an image.

That's a fascinating idea. In *Life in Denmark*

the subtitles are a very dynamic and controlling element of the viewing experience itself, but in *66 Scenes from America* I've reduced the verbal

**"in *66 Scenes from America* I've reduced the verbal aspect to a minimalistic phrase. That is, I sort of empty the film, empty each individual scene of content, by putting a label on it."**

aspect to a minimalistic phrase. That is, I sort of empty the film – empty each individual scene of content, by putting a label on it. I played around with the effect of providing the relevant information earlier or later in the scene. There's another interesting aspect: the people who do the talking in the film have to introduce themselves after they've performed their actions. In the Warhol scene I received an involuntary and perfectly wonderful gift, which precisely makes me believe in the magical significance of chance. When I similarly situate the music



*66 Scenes from America* - Photo: Ole John

in different places, I do so because I am curious to see what happens as a result. I think that doing this kind of thing has a very stimulating effect, just as the utterance in the Warhol scene does. He is told that he has to say his name and that he should do so when he has completed his action, but what happens is that the action takes a very long time to perform; it's simply agonising. I have to admit that I personally adore that, because it's a pure homage to Warhol. It couldn't be more Warholesque. That's of course why he agreed to do it. He's also almost sculptural in his way of placing things, of handling them. It's quite wonderful and at the same time there's something movingly fragile about him, so much so that one becomes quite concerned for him. I'm deeply moved by the image of his fragility. However, the scene has other chance gifts. First of all there's the temporal duration itself, which makes it a pure John Cage scene. Time passes and things happen, and the action in

question is very simple and at the same time very expressive and full of plasticity. Then some light falls through the window, a sunray changes the image twice by altering the light

**"I really believe in a kind of magic of the film material."**

on Warhol's face. This is a pure gift, something I have absolutely no control over. Finally, Warhol happens to misunderstand what he's supposed to do, so there's a long pause after he's finished eating his hamburger during which time he simply sits there, ready. His eyes flicker around and he doesn't utter the sentence immediately after he's finished eating as I'd expected him to. He sits there and we see the concern in his eyes; the suspense almost kills us, although we feel compassion too in a way. At last, after a noticeable pause, he says the phrase. The explanation for the delay is that he was waiting for a cue. Now, this delay gives

the scene a quite different dimension, I think. I like to think of many of these things, which are inscribed within the film, as comprising a kind of mysterious trace; that is, at some level, as I've already suggested, I really believe in a kind of magic of the film material. Magritte is another source of inspiration. As you know he accompanies his images with incorrect information. The effect of this is incredibly stimulating.

It's pure surrealism. I'm interested in this idea

**"I've been committed to the idea of controlling things up to a certain point. And beyond that point I prefer some uncharted territory, so that chance and circumstance can play a role."**

of claiming that something is something other than what it in fact is. I'm interested in the effect of these kinds of claims – just as music can colour the atmosphere in a given scene.



Notes On Love - Photo: Kim Hatten

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*Good and Evil* - Photo: Henning Camre

I've been committed to the idea of controlling things up to a certain point. And beyond that point I prefer some uncharted territory, so that chance and circumstance can play a role. That openness is tremendously important, and it also explains why I refuse to operate with banal dramaturgical principles. It's important to me that my films be moved by a different kind of spirit, that their pulse be different. The thing is that I'm sometimes criticised because people don't find my films sufficiently representative of the phenomena they explore, but my aim has never been to be representative. I think it's rather boring to have to exhaust a topic, to have to hear all sides of the story, as it were. I completely reject the idea that documentary filmmaking should be educational in a rational sense, the idea that it has certain obligations along these lines. I don't think that film art should be educational, but rather that it should expand some horizons and make possible certain experiences that people might find enriching or useful. However, the use value in question can't reside in some narrowly single-minded concentration on where one is going or what one should be trying to say with one's images. The stories I tell hopefully have a life of their own which cannot be translated into use value. There is of course a very reductive conception of documentary filmmaking in many parts of the world, and I'm one among a small number of documentary filmmakers who make their films exactly the way they want to, insisting that this is how they tell their stories.

**HJORT:** You're one of a handful of Danish filmmakers who have worked with a number of different genres of filmmaking. What sets you apart from your colleagues, however, is your willingness also to blur the boundaries between, for example, the genres of fiction film and documentary film. *Traberg* is particularly interesting in this respect as it documents a period in the turbulent political history of Haiti, while at the same time developing a fictional narrative about the real-world journalist, Ebbe Traberg. What, exactly, were you trying to achieve with this interesting blending of fictional and documentary elements?

**LETH:** I discovered afterwards that *Traberg* in a certain way is a remake of *Haiti Express*, although it's very different. It's less stringent than *Haiti Express*, but I wanted to make a film with a fictional story that would capture a good deal of my fascination with the exotic and the qualities associated with banana republics.

I really enjoy watching detective films myself, so I dreamt of making a kind of detective film and of perhaps adopting a playful stance in relation to the genre. When I was writing up the project together with Dan Holmberg we talked about how the hero should be a worn figure, a kind of Elmer Leonard hero, someone whose life had been full of rather dubious affairs. He should, we decided, look like Traberg, who had been my good friend for years and years, so we thought, why not use Traberg? We thought that would work, so that's what we did. We then created this set-up that had him starting out in Spain, where he actually lived, in order to find someone or other. Holmberg, my cameraman, and I actually agreed that we'd be very relaxed about the nuts and bolts of the intrigue, that is, how to get from one place to the next. Traberg just needed a reason, the envelope and so on. We decided that we'd feel no sense of obligation towards, and would relate only vaguely to, the demands of the genre. *Traberg* is not, of course, a documentary film about Traberg. It's a fiction film, that's the intention. However, what happens then is that during our stay in Haiti all hell breaks loose; Haitian reality simply explodes and a lot of very dramatic things occur. As the observer of life and reality that I am, I become absolutely fascinated with what's going on and feel that it should be included in the story. I feel that I can't simply tell a story that entirely circumvents the unfolding political drama. Instead, my view was that these events should break into the already very flimsy story. My sense was that chance, once again, had given us a gift. In a way the idea here picks up on that of *Haiti Express*. Reality is now so violent, there were those attempted coups, that we have to include it. Then it turns out that the reality in question is so overwhelming that it takes over the film, almost takes over the *Traberg* story. *Traberg* becomes peripheral, a marginal frame around a depiction of what is

**"My attitude towards religion is in all respects voyeuristic. Religion or religiosity is a strong and central element in people's lives (...) but it's a matter of curiosity. I do not have religious leanings myself."**

happening in Haiti at the time. I don't know whether *Traberg* is as interesting as *Haiti Express*, but there's a lot of extraordinarily powerful documentary material in it, I think.

In that respect it makes sense that *Traberg* should be the way it is.

**HJORT:** Many of your films articulate a kind of anthropology of religious sentiment. You

**"The idea of sacrifice or total commitment is a crucial element in my films. It plays a very important role in my description of people's efforts and achievements, of the challenges they undertake."**

have systematically focussed on human activities that involve the kinds of intense interaction that Durkheim associated with religious feeling. In *Stars and Watercarriers* you mobilise religious terms to explore the realities of cycling. In your Haiti films you return, again and again, to voodoo. Viewers watching the rather marginal collectively produced film entitled *The Search* witness a number of different religious symbols and situations, including a crucifixion. Why this emphasis on religion?

**LETH:** My attitude towards religion is in all respects voyeuristic. Religion or religiosity is a strong and central element in people's lives, and it is only as such that I have encountered it, that is, as material. It's not that I've sought it out. Take voodoo in Haiti, for example. It's clear that one encounters voodoo if one is interested in observing life in Haiti. It's also clear that it's incredibly exciting to see it, explore it, and depict it on film, but it's a matter of curiosity. I do not have religious leanings myself.

**HJORT:** Your bicycle films are extraordinary in this way, and so are your films about dance. I was reminded of a conversation I had with Anders Refn about *The Flying Devils (De flyvende djævle)* in which he said that what moved him and excited him about that film was this idea that you can't be a trapeze artist unless you really trust the other people with whom you are performing. There is the same kind of insight in your films, I think, into these irreducibly social phenomena. You really do foreground something that a lot of people are largely unaware of.

**LETH:** The idea of sacrifice or total commitment is a crucial element in my films. It plays an important role in my description of people's efforts and achievements, of the challenges they undertake. We are of course dealing here with concepts that have religious resonance. My films are frequently about sacrifice, both actual and symbolic, and it makes perfect sense

to me that the language in question would be coloured by religious concepts. I sort of use that kind of experience as a lever. I'm not reticent or in any way embarrassed about using a language that is so heavily charged or that may have religious overtones. I have the feeling that when I described those aspects of bicycle racing and dance, I really wanted to shift to another level. My own experience of these things is very sensitive; I see things that lie beyond our immediately accessible reality, which I would like to share.

**BONDEBJERG:** Your most recent film, *I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet* has just received the Best Portrait Film prize at the Odense Film Festival. The focus in this film is on the poet as singular individual and his pursuit of the kind of unique, poetic language that is capable of disclosing the world. You yourself are an exceptional poet and you've dealt with central Danish poets in some of your other films, in Klaus Rifbjerg and Danish Literature. You've objected vehemently to the tendency to use film merely to illustrate poetry and literature more generally. As a result the portrait of Rifbjerg also captures the poet in his daily existence, in his workshop, as it were, and makes present both the poetic text itself and the creative individual behind it. Your distillation of Danish literature is similarly based on the idea of foregrounding the poetic text, at times by means of the poet himself. Do you see these literary films as part of a larger series of films about outstanding individuals? Do you see yourself as using the same techniques and approach here as in your films about great sportsmen or about Peter Martins?

**LETH:** No, I don't see the films as parts of a series, but I don't mind if others do, because of course the starting point is the same: a fascination with excellence, with the truly exceptional. I don't use the same techniques in all the films in question, but the basic perspective is

**"He repeatedly said that he was sure that my cool aesthetic distance in relation to what he called his 'overheated' poetry would lead to something good. I think he was right."** (About the film *'I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet'*)

certainly the same. It's a matter of witnessing the ultimate achievement, something sublime, while exploring the disciplined work that underwrites it; it's a matter of penetrating a

given milieu. Films about literature are unique in the sense that they require an almost surgical precision. I hate the trivialisation of literature, and there's certainly a lot of that in film. I'm allergic to it. I remember that when I was making the film about Klaus Rifbjerg I was terrified by the idea that it might become a lot of unstructured talk, so I devised some tableaux, where I felt the author could appear as a clearly defined image of himself, thereby eliminating the illusion of an interview. I think the result was a little rigid. Danish Literature is inspired by formal issues; by the challenge involved in the arrogant thought of being able to provide a cinematic presentation of all of Danish literature in 40 minutes. That is, the motor force here was the idea of abbreviation. What inspired me was the dizzying thought of wrestling with such an enormous topic under strict formal constraints. I think it worked.

**"Søren Ulrik's poetry and personality have inspired me and my collaborators to make something very powerful and pure. Dan Holmberg, my photographer, has produced some of the most beautiful work he's ever done, and the same is true of Camilla Skousen, my editor. I dare say that the poems inspired us to make a film that itself is a kind of poem."** (About *'I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet'*)

It was also a filmmaker's dream involving a personal selection of texts by authors both dead and alive, and a set of clear rules. That was what was decisive. And one of the rules of the game was: no illustration of texts.

That rule was also decisive for my collaboration with Søren Ulrik Thomsen. I hate it when poems are illustrated with images. Film simply cannot compete with the suggestive power of poetry's imagery. I don't like it when a film intrudes on a poem and appropriates its language. What is required is a much more controlled strategy. Søren Ulrik Thomsen had himself expressed a desire to see me make the film about him. I was nervous in the beginning, because I didn't know whether our chemistry would be right, but everything worked out very nicely. I'm very pleased with that film. It's as though I was offered that project at exactly the right moment. Søren Ulrik's poetry and personality have inspired me, and my collaborators, to make something very powerful and pure. Dan Holmberg, my photographer, has produced

some of the most beautiful work he's ever done, and the same is true of Camilla Skousen, my editor. I dare say that the poems inspired us to make a film that itself is a kind of poem. Søren

**"I think the film reveals Søren Ulrik Thomsen's stature as a poet and his generosity as a person. That's not nothing."** (About the film *'I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet'*)

Ulrik came to Haiti so that we could talk about the project, and the first thing he said was that it was important to him to know that I would make a film that I would be pleased with from an artistic point of view. I presented a potential problem to him, the fact that I refuse to illustrate poems, although I did want to be able to make use of a lot decontextualised images from his poetry. He solved this by simply giving me carte blanche to cannibalise his poems as I saw fit. He repeatedly said that he was sure that my cool aesthetic distance in relation to what he called his 'overheated' poetry would lead to something good. I think he was right. The stories he tells in the film, about his childhood and his method, he had those in his head right from the start. He outlined several of them for me in Haiti a year before we started. Those were things he wanted to give to the film, I clearly understood that, and I also regard them as a gift. The fact that the stories in question were so polished and complete also helped to establish the film's style. Søren Ulrik Thomsen as a person and poet was fully present and at the same time at a comfortable distance. I felt like making a film with emblematically clear images. So I asked myself: What do I have? I have the poet's poetry, I have him as a physical person, I have what he wants to say and I have his concrete environment, his tools and immediate milieu. Those are the elements. No mediating, connective tissue, just the pure goods. I think the film reveals Søren Ulrik Thomsen's stature as a poet and his generosity as a person. That's not nothing ■

*(1) Refers to a generation of painters associated with the professors C.W. Eckersberg and J.L. Lund. Key names include Christen Købke, Dankvart Dreyer, Constantin Hansen, Jens Juel, Johan Thomas Lundbye, Jørgen Roed, Martinus Rørbye and P.C. Skovgaard. The fertile period in question dates from 1820 to 1850 and emphasises portraiture, genre and landscape painting, realism, national historical themes and Danish nature.*



# JØRGEN LETH

Born 1937

Jørgen Leth studied literature and anthropology at the University of Århus and the University of Copenhagen, and has worked as a journalist for Aktuelt (1959–63) and Politiken (1964–67). Leth, who is both a poet and a filmmaker, was a salient voice for Danish poetic modernism in the 1960s and a key figure in the 1960s' milieu of experimental documentary filmmakers, especially the artists' collective ABCinema. Leth's most important contributions to experimental and documentary filmmaking are *The Perfect Human* (Det perfekte menneske, 1967), *Life in Denmark* (Livet i Danmark, 1971) and *66 Scenes from America* (66 scener fra Amerika, 1981). Leth has also developed a unique mythic or epic approach to the genre of sports documentaries, an approach that is best exemplified by *Stars and Watercarriers* (Stjernerne og vandbærerne, 1973) and *A Sunday in Hell* (En forårsdag i helvede, 1976). These films have helped to make Leth a much-loved and frequently used sports commentator for Danish television, particularly in connection with the annual coverage of the Tour de France. His wide-ranging production of short and documentary films includes several works about artistic figures and techniques, an example being his most recent film, *I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet* (Jeg er levende. Søren Ulrik Thomsen, digter, 1999). In the area of feature film-making, Leth has developed a distinctive style characterised by experimental modes of narration. He has his own production company, Sunset Productions Inc., and has lived in Haiti since 1991.

## FEATURE FILMS

- 1975 **Good and Evil** (*Det gode og det onde*)
- 1983 **Haiti Express** (*Udenrigskorrespondenten*)
- 1989 **Notes on Love** (*Notater om kærligheden*)
- 1992 **Traberg**

## SHORT FILMS AND DOCUMENTARIES

- 1963 **Stop for Bud** (*Stopforbud*)
- 1965 **Look Forward to a Time of Security** (*Se frem til en tryg tid*)
- 1967 **The Perfect Human** (*Det perfekte menneske*)
- 1968 **Near Heaven, Near Earth** (*Nær himlen, nær jorden*)
- 1968 **Ophelia's Flowers** (*Ofelias blomster*)
- 1968 **The Deer Garden Film** (*Dyrehavefilmen*)
- 1969 **Jens Otto Krag**
- 1970 **The Search** (*Eftersøgningen*)
- 1970 **Without Kin** (*Fraendeløs*)
- 1970 **The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest** (*Dyrehaven, den romantiske skov*)
- 1970 **Motion Picture**
- 1970 **Teatret i de grønne bjerge**
- 1971 **Life in Denmark** (*Livet i Danmark*)
- 1972 **Chinese Ping Pong** (*Kinesisk bordtennis*)
- 1973 **Eddy Merckx i nærværelsen af en kop kaffe** (for television)
- 1973 **Stars and Watercarriers** (*Stjernerne og vandbærerne*)
- 1974 **Klaus Rifbjerg**
- 1975 **The Impossible Hour** (*Den umulige time*)
- 1976 **A Sunday in Hell** (En forårsdag i helvede)
- 1978 **Peter Martins: A Dancer** (Peter Martins - en danser)
- 1979 **Kalule**
- 1979 **A Midsummer's Play** (*Sanct Hansaften-spil*)
- 1979 **Dancing Bouronville** (At danse Bouronville)
- 1981 **Step on Silence**
- 1981 **66 Scenes from America** (66 scener fra Amerika)
- 1983 **Pelota**
- 1986 **Moments of Play** (*Det legende menneske*)
- 1986 **Notebook from China** (*Notater fra Kina*)
- 1989 **Danish Literature** (*Dansk litteratur*)
- 1993 **Michael Laudrup: A Football Player** (Michael Laudrup - en fodboldspiller)
- 1995 **Haïti, Untitled** (*Haïti. Uden titel*)
- 1999 **I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet**  
(Jeg er levende. Søren Ulrik Thomsen, digter)
- 2001 **Dreamers** (*Drømmere*)
- 2002 **New Scenes from America** (Nye scener fra Amerika)

## BOOKS

- 1962 **Yellow Light** (*Gult lys*)
- 1964 **Canal** (*Kanal*)
- 1967 **Sports Poems** (*Sportsdigte*)
- 1967 **Happiness in No-man's Land** (*Lykken i Ingenmandsland*)
- 1969 **Smooth, Inflated Cushions** (*Glatte hårdtpumpede puder*)
- 1971 **The Adventure of Ordinary Sights** (*Eventyret om den sædvanlige udsigt*)
- 1975 **It Passed Me By** (*Det går forbi mig*)
- 1976 **Like Something in a Dream** (*Det er ligesom noget i en drøm*)
- 1979 **The Film Machine** (*Filmmaskinen*)
- 1987 **How They Look** (*Hvordan de ser ud*)
- 1994 **The Dogs are Barking** (*Hundene gör*)
- 1994 **The Yellow Jersey in the High Mountains** (*Den gule trøje i de høje bjerge*)
- 2000 **What the Picture Shows** (*Billedet forestiller*)
- 2002 **Collected Poems** (*Samlede digte*)

## WORKS IN PROGRESS

- The Five Obstructions** (*De fem benspænd*)
- The Erotic Human** (*Det erotiske menneske*)



# NOTES ON LOVE

(754) *Desire is seated in the eyes. Therefrom it spreads through the body. To the stomach, the arms, the legs and, finally the genitals. It starts in the eyes which pass on the message. A man with his eyes closed will not have an erection.*

(756) *Love is not seated in the eyes. It is seated in the skin of the belly and of the arms. When love is strong, we feel the need to embrace tightly those we love.* (Bronislaw Malinowski: The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia, 1929).

*I observe you. I see what you do. All the time. Every instant. I see when you put strawberry jam on top of the cheese. I see when you remove your mascara. I see when you close your eyes and give yourself to me in bed. I observe you. I want to understand everything you do.*

(Jørgen Leth)

From the catalogue Copenhagen Film + Video Workshop Festival 90



Notes on Love - Photo: Vibeke Winding

# HOLDING YOUR HANDS FIRMLY

By Jørgen Leth

*Holding your hands firmly above your head  
with my left hand taking your left knee  
with my right hand and bending it out to one side  
and in this way spreading your legs whilst I watch you  
watch you I lock myself into your eyes and imprint  
myself therein in an unbroken passage this entire order  
as it unfolds itself your neck your shoulders  
breasts your belly your thighs the entire sequence  
taken down and love you impartially  
and in great detail*

*I see the beads of sweat shaped and trickling slowly  
thereafter faster on down over your skin inhale deeply  
your smell lock myself into you see you so clearly  
see you so clearly take a hold on your flesh  
frame your hips in a tight clip and  
this could happen this could happen here in the Hotel  
Amazonas in Manaus where cast iron balconies rust and  
Italian tenors once sang about immortal  
love in the heavy equatorial night and this  
could happen again at the Grande Hotel in Juazeiro where  
I will lift myself up from the bed and walk and see  
out over the Sao Francisco river where the full moon  
reflects itself within the waters and here I will pull the blinds  
aside and let the moonlight flood your naked body  
in precisely measured seconds and in this way expose  
one single image like the old anthropologists  
of unknown tribes in the jungle love you impartially  
and in great detail and already tomorrow have made in  
the heat an evanescent imprint of my recollection of  
this staging a night by the river.*

*From the collection of poems HVORDAN DE SER UD, Gyldendal 1987.*



# THE EROTIC HUMAN

(in pre-production, title to be confirmed)

Jørgen Leth's next film is tentatively titled *THE EROTIC HUMAN*. A few scenes have already been filmed in Haiti. It will be a feature-length personal documentary about seduction

**"It will be a personal documentary of feature length about eroticism. Where does eroticism begin? What does man want with eroticism? Where do we find examples of it? My point of departure is curiosity. I don't know anything, but want to know everything. I want to examine the elementary: How does a human being function? The film will be shot in different cultures. I have chosen some places where eroticism might be very visible. We will study the sensual significance of dance and survey the erotic zones of the body. And also depict the game of love in a way that will stimulate our inclination for voyeurism, but which is at the same time aesthetically renewing."**

(Jørgen Leth / Jacmel, June 8, 2001)

techniques and traditions in different cultures, shot on film, destined for international theatrical distribution as well as television and video. About his project Jørgen Leth writes: "The film will be an exploration of the subject. We will look for seduction as a driving force in various parts of the world ... Where does the erotic attraction begin? What does the human being want from it? How does it come about? Where can we see it, where can we collect examples of it?"

The film project is based on some of Leth's essays about erotic life. He takes an anthropological angle, but with the cinematic poet's point of view that is his trademark: "It will be a man's point of view. Not a 'neutral', balanced view. There is undeniably a subject behind every observation, every reflection. The subject's ideas, motive, indeed even breath and heartbeat will be part of the film's being."

Jørgen Leth: "Dance is seduction. Dance is erotic. The popular Haitian singer Michel Marteley encourages dancers to get a good grip on each other. The upright, minimally moving embrace is one of the most beautiful acts of love, so visible, so exhibitionist if you like. This is true of the meringue in the Dominican Republic, the samba in Brazil, the salsa in Cuba, the tango in Argentina, the jazz in Senegal. Dance will be important in this film."

Leth distances his project from pornographic filmmaking. "Of course, we shall have some of our hot dreams of becoming a voyeur fulfilled. We shall see people in intimate situations. But the aesthetic strategy is everything: How to frame it. How to place it in a visual and textual formula that will have the effect of an encyclopaedia that is both informative and subtle."

The film will show the intended counterposing of sober description and erotic passion, which will be the driving force of the film.

The anthropological angle will show that in some cultures the visible signs (social status, a ring, pregnancy, marriage) are a natural and necessary part of the approach to love.

**"How can a young woman be such a good lover and such a sharp business-woman at the same time and in the same place: the bed? In the sexual act there is always a deal. The woman wants to know what is in it for her. To get something out of it is important for her. This is maybe more evident in Haiti than elsewhere. I need that aspect for this film: To show, what is driving people. And that is also a very stimulating element in the sexual exchange."**

(Jørgen Leth)

The film will be shot in different parts of the world. Leth will travel with his crew to Laos, Japan, Papua New Guinea, Brazil, Colombia, Iceland, The United States of America, The Dominican Republic and Senegal. Production started in 2000 with one week's shooting in Haiti. Leth and his producer Marianne Christensen travelled to Senegal in October 2001. In Senegal Leth studied the poetic world of the Senegalese women and their famous seduction traditions. He wants his film to show the aesthetics and the beauty of this country's women. Nordisk Film Productions A/S, the world's most longstanding film production facility, is producing *The Erotic Human* with financial backing from the Danish Film Institute ■



# THE MAGIC OF THE FILM REEL AND THE DV CAMERA AS A NOTE PAD

BY JØRGEN LETH

My encounter with light video cameras took place in the turbulent period during the Haiti embargo from 1991 to 1994. I was there, and I wanted to make the ultimate, all-embracing film about life in Haiti, as a kind of answer to the question, which I had also asked, why I had chosen to live in that crazy country.

What strikes you, of course, is the heady feeling of having the camera in your own hand. As a director you perceive this as a shortening of the gap from thought to action. What can you use it for, you ask yourself; what kind of doors can DV open into the description of reality into which we are constantly seeking new entries? Can we attain a new kind of narrative?

New methods and new aesthetic strategies are emerging from the mobility afforded by DV technology. The camera has become an elegant little nothing: it's no trouble and you can take it anywhere. This in itself means new knowledge, new approaches, new preparedness. But this mobility – if it is to take us to artistically interesting places – requires sensitiveness and unrelenting clarity of perception, and it continues to require that we make choices. We have to settle on a few limitations, a way of seeing, a way of organizing our presentation.

I have heard about weird projects in which people collect two or three hundred hours of material, and then face a bottomless ocean. I have heard about it with some bewilderment, with the sense of a natural disaster. I can't wait to hear about the artistic and production rationale for the non-choices that must surely lie behind such a vast amount of footage.

## IN DEFENCE OF FILM

I am currently preparing a film on America. Despite my positive experience of the DV camera I can be in no doubt as to my choice of format. I will shoot on film. Only film possesses the qualities that are vital for the degree of stylization I am aiming for, such as the conciseness of the framing, the shades of light of each mood. Only film will allow them

to be cultivated with sufficient precision.

I spoke to Dan Holmberg recently about the blessings of the DV camera. He shot *66 Scenes from America* and has been my cameraman for years. He said "The DV camera is a stupid little plastic gadget that may be useful if you want to follow pop stars through a cellar. But it is absurd to use it as a film tool; it cannot pick up the nuances of a sunrise, it is primitive, everything is over-obvious, it looks like a supermarket commercial, and you have to put your material through electronic colour grading at ten thousand crowns an hour to make it look like film. Why not buy a film camera to start with? You're in a field and you know what you can get in the can, but with your little plastic gadget you can't get things into focus and everything dissipates."

**I know that one late afternoon, precisely in the final golden glow from the sun as it sets behind the mountains, a genuine zombie, a living dead, will appear down the dusty street. Things will happen that will not be repeated; miracles, perhaps. I hope that in situations like those I will be sufficiently in command of my technical phobias and fumblings to use my DV camera.**

He continued talking about the long conversations the DV camera seems to invite: "What is the use of talking for five hours? It is better to talk with the subject beforehand, set up, and give him five minutes to talk about life and death and love. Then you get something out of it. The clapper board is a good instrument."

He wanted to add something positive. "Of course it is a fantastic opportunity to be able to hold the camera away from you and get 40 minutes onto a tape the size of a packet of cigarettes". But he ended negatively all the same: "the 16 mm image has far greater resolution, and you can't argue the fact." The next day Dan Holmberg rang me before he set off. He had one more line to add: "After all, we make films. Not video games."

I have always been fascinated by the thought

of a film as a notepad. The film as notes, as a sketch pad.

Obviously using the DV camera to take notes is tempting. But it is as if we're dealing with a self-annulling quality. Your note-taking technique can become too casual. The exciting thing from my point of view is precisely the taking of notes on expensive film, gouging, imprinting your impressions in time that is running by, time that can be quite specifically calculated in money terms. To me a note is an aesthetic strategy and a budget is a creative factor. What goads me on is what is forbidden, the laying of dynamite beneath the chromium-plated bastions of technology, reducing the gap between idea and implementation, but without eliminating the substance, the matter, and the resistance that must be overcome. Perhaps this is because I am obsessed by cultivating authenticity – the extent of the time, the moment, the way the film reel counts down eternity. I love the relentlessness of film, only having a few reels, or lots of reels, of having what you've got. The film winds through the camera. It is dizzying. That is the path I shall be pursuing for now.

## THE SPARK OF PRESENCE

I have my DV camera on me. Having it available is a pleasant feeling. I am not a cameraman. I have technophobia. I prefer working with the membrane, the polished lense, that the cameraman puts between me and the subject. I like being at a distance. But there are situations, such as in studies of *Det erotiske menneske* (*The Erotic Human*, Jørgen Leth's next feature film) in which I am sure certain moments can only be captured with the spark of presence afforded by the DV camera.

Moreover, I also know that one late afternoon, precisely in the final golden glow from the sun as it sets behind the mountains, a genuine zombie, a living dead, will appear down the dusty street. Things will happen that will not be repeated; miracles, perhaps. I hope that in situations like those I will be sufficiently in command of my technical phobias and fumblings to use my DV camera ■

# NEW SCENES FROM AMERICA



New Scenes from America - Photo: Dan Holmberg

**Jørgen Leth's 66 Scenes from America (1981) is internationally acknowledged as a principal work in the history of the documentary. When he and Dan Holmberg, his cinematographer from those days, decided to make a sequel they naturally intended it to be a work of art of the same standard: a creative documentary in the true sense of the word.**

From his home in Jacmel, Haiti, Jørgen Leth wrote to DFI film consultant Allan Berg Nielsen in January 1999:

"We would like to make a film that would go well with the original in an international context, an observation anew that will put the era in perspective, an update, toying with the idea of describing the West."

We want to gather and organize new film material from the America that continues

to inspire us visually. We are interested in immersion, filmic iconography, economy of structure. We aim to make our methods more sophisticated by using the minimum of means. Our method of production will be mobile and incredibly simplified. In *66 Scenes from America* we conducted ourselves playfully with the iconographic wealth available on the spot; we toyed with the way the West frames life.

All the images are templates. Robert Frank's



New Scenes from America - Photo: Dan Holmberg

photographs and Edward Hopper's paintings were our immediate source of inspiration. We cultivated the Americana we knew so well from the American artists. Their vision of the great plains, the endless roads, the dream of freedom. We elaborated upon the mythological charisma of the gas stations and diners in the landscape, for example. Without Edward Hopper's art in our heads we would not have been able to play that game. We put Andy Warhol into a room in New York and asked him to eat a hamburger, which of course he did with his own awareness of the perspective of space and time. An icon carries out a concrete yet simultaneously profoundly mythologized act, and thus falls into place in the sequence of images, monumentalized.

We want to go further, with the experience and sensitivity we possess, the age we are at, and the tenderness combined with sobriety we feel we are able to bring to bear on the inexhaustible material we know still awaits us.

We envisage a playful, elegant film. One shouldn't be afraid of repeating oneself. On the contrary; great artists return to the same themes. Without wishing to compare ourselves to them, we will adopt the same working model. Simple means. Black and white film. Highways, motels, Frank, Edward Hopper, and then Leth and Holmberg. Today at around the turn of the century. What does America look like when we seek out the visual templates that are so expressive? Observations. Notes.

The most important simplification of method will be that this time we will produce a considerable portion of the images as stills. Dan Holmberg is doing more work with regard to the possibilities of the still photograph. In several films we have experimented with the juxtaposition of stills and moving images, most recently in our portrait of Søren Ulrik Thomsen, *I'm Alive*. In *New Scenes from America* we will take a more radical approach to the possibilities inherent in this collage format. Much of the film will be shot as stills, and moving images will blast movement in at strategic moments, plus a series of simple tableaux featuring mythological characters.

This project is a wishful dream. We've been talking about it for some time. A grand passion drives us to describe the project like this in the hope that it will persuade somebody that the project should be made". DFI film consultant Allan Berg Nielsen was persuaded immediately.

#### TWO YEARS LATER LETH WROTE AGAIN:

*25 September 2001*

*Dear Allan,*

*I'm writing to you from Los Angeles. We are doing the final takes for *New Scenes from America*. The title has certainly assumed a profounder significance.*

*We had just finished shooting in New York three days before hell broke loose.*

*Dan Holmberg and I had flown to Dallas the Monday before that terrible Tuesday and we watched events on CNN that morning at our Dallas airport motel.*

*Marianne Christensen, Claus Willadsen and my son Asger were still in New York.*

*Marianne kept me up to date on their situation.*

*It was awful for all of them. Asger was staying in an apartment in TriBeCa just nine blocks from the World Trade Center and from it could see far too much: the second plane chopping into the second tower, and worst of all, people jumping out of the windows, some as if they were trying to fly, others head first, others hand in hand, others with arms flailing. Scenes that the TV stations all immediately agreed not to broadcast. But Asger and his girlfriend saw them with the naked eye. It was a horrific sight that is difficult to come to terms with.*

*Marianne and Claus were staying in an apartment in mid Manhattan. They were evacuated a couple of times as the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings came under threat. It was all a wicked nightmare and affected them all very badly. A good thing they had one another.*

*Fortunately for the film Dan and I were already on the road. After the initial paralysis he and I calmly continued working on the film as we crossed the South West through Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and California. We have captured lots of beautiful images and we've been cultivating the same understated, subtle style typical of the old film, but with new perceptions, new explorations of individual motifs.*

*The film is in the bag. Tomorrow we're shooting a scene with Dennis Hopper and perhaps one with Gena Rowlands and with the architect Frank Gehry.*

*But I have given a lot of thought to the fact that it will be necessary to shoot one more vital scene.*

*It is odd to think of the scenes we shot two weeks ago from Jersey City with the Lower Manhattan skyline as a fantastic backdrop, sparkling with the reflected sundown across the River Hudson. That profile has now changed, just as the world changed on that day.*

*Now for the vital idea that I believe must be realised in order to put everything into perspective. We'll have to go back to New York in November when the dust has settled and shoot a new picture of the Lower Manhattan skyline from Jersey as a possible closing image.*

*I have given it a great deal of thought. At first I thought it would be too hard hitting. Today I am convinced it must be done.*

*The reasons are simple. I don't think I'd ever forgive myself if we didn't do it. I think the film will acquire decisive value through the addition of such a scene.*

*The film has been made the way it was conceived from the start. We never refer to what took place. Nobody mentions it with a single word in the film. But we have made a film about America within a specific time frame. We can't get round that. And that is how it will be perceived. It will of course have a profound effect that there is a scene with a New York fire-fighter who introduces himself thus: "I'm a New York fire-fighter. I live and put out fires in New York City". But we shot it four days before the terrorist attack.*

*We can shoot the proposed scene very tastefully without compromising the poker-faced attitude of the film. We've got to have that image. We've made the film in a time frame in which Lower Manhattan looks resplendent at first and then suddenly loses its teeth. In the sundown reflected from New Jersey.*

*Life is our subject matter, after all. We are making images of the way things look in America.*

*I don't think I could live with just leaving the first image to stand alone.*

*Yours truly, Jørgen*

# THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS



Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth discussing *The Five Obstructions* - Photo: Ole Kragh-Jacobsen

**To understand the mindset that underlies *The Five Obstructions* one must understand the documentary ‘poetics’ of Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth as they themselves have formulated them in the following texts:**

### DEFOCUS

We are searching for something fictional, not factual. Fiction is limited by our imagination and facts by our insight, and the part of the world that we are seeking cannot be encompassed by a “story” or embraced from an “angle”. The subject matter we seek is found in the same reality that inspires fiction-makers; the reality that journalists believe they are describing. But they cannot find this unusual subject matter because their techniques blind them. Nor do they want to find it, because the techniques have become the goal itself.

If one discovers or seeks a story, to say nothing of a point that communicates, then one suppresses it. By emphasising a simple pattern, genuine or artificial; by presenting the world with a picture puzzle with solutions chosen in advance.

The story, the point, the disclosure and the sensation have taken this subject matter from us – this; the rest of the world which is not nearly so easy to pass on, but which we cannot live without!

The story is the villain. The theme presented at the expense of all decency. But also the case in which a point’s importance is presumably submitted for the audience to evaluate, assisted by viewpoints and facts counterbalanced by their antitheses. The worship of pattern, the one and only, at the expense of the subject matter from which it comes. How do we rediscover it, and how do we impart or describe it? The ultimate challenge of the future – to see without looking; to defocus! In a world where the media kneel before the altar of sharpness, draining life out of life in the process, the DEFOCUSIST will be the communicators of our era – nothing more, nothing less!

Lars von Trier, March 2000

### THE MOMENT COMES

The part of a film I enjoy the most, is when one can feel time flow through a single scene. There should always be room for time. A film should breath naturally. When we go out, we set a trap for reality, so that we may persuade it to fit into that mindset we have organized. We are relaxed, attentive and noncommittal. Things happen when they happen. We are just as clever and just as stupid as fishermen. We can go out when we like in any defined direction and sometimes we stumble over a magic moment. That is what we are searching for, but we must not be too eager or too sure of it. Experience tells us that it exists. In our work, we are armed with our instinct, our eyes and our ears. We concentrate on empty space as well as occupied space. We observe silence and noise. We trust in chance’s limitless gifts and yet the place in which we find ourselves isn’t necessarily a product of chance. The moment suddenly comes when we are no longer astonished by its appearance. There we are. We are ready to capture it, to come to terms with it. We don’t know where it will lead us. We follow the flow, we see where it wants to go and what it wants to do with us. We watch it take form and come together but we must ground it while it is still flowing and not too defined. We are in love. A feeling has hit us, we try to perceive it during its superficial passage yet are afraid of losing it again by understanding it too well.

Jørgen Leth, April 2000

**The creation of the idea behind *The Five Obstructions* can be followed in the initial correspondence between the two directors in 2000:**

#### ---- Oprindelig meddelelse ----

**Fra:** jorgen leth  
**Sendt:** 28. november 2000 15:58  
**Til:** Lars Von Trier  
**Cc:** carsten.holst@filmbyen.com  
**Emne:** SV: The Five Obstructions / benspænd

**Lars Von Trier <zentropa@filmbyen.com> wrote:**

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Dear Jørgen,

The challenge/The Film you are supposed to make/solve is called: The five obstructions.

As a starting point I would like you to show me a 10 minutes film, you have made - The Perfect Human Being.

We will watch the movie together and talk about it – then I will set up limitations, commands or prohibitions, which means you have to do the film all over again. This we will do five times – of this the title. I would find it natural if our conversations became a part of the final movie – with the six small films, of course.

I hope you’re happy with the assignment. Maybe the subject for the first movie should be something we came to an agreement about? Of course we would have the most fun if the subject is of a character that gives us as big a difference as possible between film one and six?

Let me know how you feel about this. Please write.

Best regards  
Lars

#### Re: The Five obstructions

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Dear Lars,

I find the assignment tempting. I can see an interesting development between film one and six, the route around the obstacles, the conversations, I’m sure we’ll get a lot out of this. It is exciting. I look forward to your obstructions.

I really like the idea about having to change, adjust, and reduce according to given conditions in the process.

Best regards  
Jørgen

**The first *Obstructions* meeting between Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth took place in April 2001 and unfolded in a most intriguing way. Lars presented the first obstructions and Jørgen was challenged - to say the least. Jørgen says:**

"Between Lars and me I can say there is sympathy and professional respect, but also both of us have an appreciation of play, and experiment, and teasing. We share a fascination with getting into the bone of filmmaking. Down to basic elements, simplicity of image and sound. For instance, working in an empty space, in which you put words, bodies, movements, gestures - in observing what's happening. Playing the naive anthropologist who knows nothing about life is my favorite role.

So we are entering a game - but not a sweet children's game. It will be full of traps and vicious turns... Lars claims he has seen *The Perfect Human* more than 30 times. Well, that's flattering. But now he wants me to deconstruct it (to use a word that Woody Allen used).

I accept the challenge.

Obstruction is a word from the football terminology. I once made a film about the great Danish football player Michael Laudrup. He was a virtuoso with lots of unpredictable moves. He attracted obstructions, he invited tough play, and elegantly always avoided to fall or to get injured. Michael Laudrup will be my role model. I will invite Lars to put in all his dirty tricks and ways to make life difficult for me..."

This film will develop from a project having Jørgen Leth's fingerprints on it, into a film carrying fingerprints clearly identifiable as Lars von Trier's. Shooting began in Cuba in November 2001 ■



**THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS / DE FEM BENSPÆND** / 70-80 min., video/35mm  
**Script/Idea** Lars von Trier **Directors** Jørgen Leth, Lars von Trier **Director of Photography** Dan Holmberg, Kim Hattesen **Production** Zentropa Real / Filmbyen / Avedøre Tøurvej 10 / DK-2650 Hvidovre / Tel +45 3678 0055 / Fax +45 3678 0077 / zentropa@filmbyen.com / www.zentropa-film.com / **Producer** Carsten Holst / carsten.holst@filmbyen.com **Expected release** April 2003

#### LARS VON TRIER

Born 1956. In the book 'Danish Directors' Mette Hjort and Ib Bondebjerg describe Trier as a "director who has contributed most to the renewal of Danish film. Of the directors who have drawn attention to Danish film internationally, he is the one who has had the greatest impact on the new 1990s generation, not least because of his central role in Dogme\*95." His cinematic work ranges from avant garde films to innovative explorations of some of the classical film genres.

*The Five Obstructions* - Photo: Dan Holmberg

# ANNOTATED FILMOGRAPHY

**From the book about**

**Jørgen Leth's work: "Også i dag oplevede jeg noget",**  
(*Today too, I had an experience*, edit.) 1999,  
Information's forlag /  
Mediefabrikken

BY ANDERS LEIFER

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## Stop for Bud (Stopforbud)

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1963 - 12 min. - B&W - direction, screenplay, editing Jørgen Leth, Ole John, Jens Jørgen Thorsen - camera Ole John - with Bud Powell - narrator Dexter Gordon - music Bud Powell - production Jørgen Leth, Ole John, Jens Jørgen Thorsen.

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*Stop for Bud* is an experimental portrait of the American jazz pianist Bud Powell. The film was shot by a sometimes moving camera in contrast-poor black and white, with a slightly dreamy tone as the celebrated pianist proceeded through Copenhagen locations such as Kongens Have (a park), a dockside and a rubbish dump. The picture compositions are often untradition-

nal, such as the introductory tilt that shows the pianist from his feet upwards, an extreme bird's eye view in a factory-like setting or a handheld travelling shot that follows Powell's legs on a stroll. The editing does not pretend to create a clear thread through the material but may be seen as a loose juxtaposition of a series of images or situations.

The film also includes a concert scene from the Montmartre jazz club in which Powell's face and fingers are studied from a series of beautiful, dark angles as he plays, but without synchronous sound. We hear Bud Powell playing on the soundtrack and at the beginning and end of the film Dexter Gordon tells a couple of stories about Powell and his innovative impact on jazz.

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## Look Forward to a Time of Security (Se frem til en tryg tid)

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1965 - 10 min. - B&W - direction, editing Jørgen Leth, Ole John - camera Ole John - sound Ebbe Raun - music Louis Hjulmand - production Bauhaus Situationiste, Laterna Film.

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*Look Forward to a Time of Security* is a study of the basic elements of film, first and foremost framing and the relationship between image and sound.

The film consists of shots of a Spanish barber at work, a man telling

stories, and the musician Louis Hjulmand playing the vibraphone. Correspondingly we hear the sounds of shaving, the silly stories and Hjulmand's music, but on the soundtrack the music is from a piano and not a vibraphone, and sound and picture are never in synch. The elements are combined at random, giving us a powerful indication of the artifice of film, and there are brief, comical clashes, such as when a visual of shaving foam is countered with words like cement mixer and whipped cream on the soundtrack.

Unusual image compositions are toyed with and the framing is absolute, with the barber's movements often transgressing the frame of the shot, for example. The film ends without pictures as the soundtrack seems to be torn past the tape head. The title is a social democratic party slogan.

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## The Perfect Human (Det perfekte menneske)

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1968 - 13 min. - B&W - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Henning Camre, Ole John - sound Kaj Gram - editing Knud Hauge - with Claus Nissen, Maiken Algren - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Henning Christiansen - production Laterna Film.

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Like *Life in Denmark*, *Good and Evil*, and *Notes on Love*, sensible anthropological study is apparently on the

programme, and in Leth's award-winning breakthrough it assumes an elegant, highly amusing form. Spanning a period of 22 years these films revolve skittishly around human nature, and apart from the more documentary *Life in Denmark*, each has actor Claus Nissen as Leth's artful alter ego.

Nissen and Maiken Algren are in an empty white room with only the essential props for each scene. A bed, bedding, a table, chairs. "We are going to see the perfect human being in action", we hear, and Leth's voice puts descriptive or puzzled words to the little actions the film exhibits: the man touches his face investigatively, fills a pipe, cuts his nails, and gets undressed, but he does peculiar things, too: he jumps as if he is weightless, snaps his fingers in strange ways, and dances with exaggerated movements and no music. "Today, too, I had an experience that I hope I shall understand in a few days' time", he ponders.

The whole film is staged with great clarity in its picture compositions with several characteristic zooms to indicate the bodily parts of the perfect human being, and emphasis on the light, boundless nothingness of the room. The soundtrack reveals tones of a clarinet touching on the stylistically consistent visuals. At its premiere at the Carlton cinema *Det perfekte menneske* was shown prior to Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*.



Peter Martins: A Dancer Photo: Ole John

### Near Heaven, Near Earth (Nær himlen, nær jorden)

1968 - 26 min. - B&W and colour - direction Jørgen Leth, Ole John - camera Ole John - sound Jørgen Leth, Knud Kristensen - editing Niels Schwalbe, Jørgen Leth - narrator Jørgen Leth - music J. S. Bach, The Beatles - production Laterna Film.

*Near Heaven, Near Earth* is a film about hippie life in Nepal shot completely at the same level as its participants. A couple of interviews provide insight into the hippie philosophy and we follow a visit to a temple in which the hippies seem like peaceful beings from another planet.

The visuals, in black and white and colour, are kaleidoscopic, and reveal a dramatic interest in the camera as a physical object: there is a constant toying with zoom, the camera swings back and forth, and in a series of zany shots from a rickshaw the film provides some

very tangible sensory impressions from Kathmandu. Two sequences stand out in terms of form: flickering fast motion communicates what is clearly a filmic acid trip and towards the end of the film six or seven different visual materials are blended into a repetitive, metrical montage.

On the soundtrack Bach's St. John Passion is used as film music as are a number of Beatles songs, floating in the atmosphere around the hippies as if from a crackling transistor radio.

### Ophelia's Flowers (Ofelias blomster)

1968 - 7 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Jørgen Leth, Ole John - camera Henning Camre, Ole John - sound Keld Hansen, Niels Ishøj - editing Niels Schwalbe - sets Per Kirkeby - with Lene Adler Petersen - production Laterna Film.

In Per Kirkeby's set with a blue

backdrop beside a woodland lake Lene Adler Petersen recites Ophelia's madness monologue from Hamlet, but she is constantly interrupted by the sound of two wooden blocks and has to start again: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance ..." The words thereby rapidly lose their meaning and our interest turns to the specific sounds emerging from Adler Petersen's lips and the choreographed way she touches her face.

The film starts and ends classically with a zoom in from an establishing shot and a zoom out onto a concluding tableau in which Ophelia throws herself into the lake, but in between the film is experimental, with two cameras on tracks abiding by a carefully conceived but highly impenetrable system. The frame thus changes apparently according to signals from Leth, and occasionally the camera seems to track right off the set into the sylvan wilderness. At its premiere at the Carlton it was shown before Roman Polanski's *Dance of the vampires*.

### The Deer Garden Film (Dyrehavefilmen)

1969 - 5 min. - colour - collective film - music Antonio Vivaldi - production ABCinema.

Fragmentary super 8 footage from the Royal Deer Park north of Copenhagen with ABCinema members as cameramen and hence directors. The shots of the group filming one another gives the film a powerfully self-reflecting character. The footage was assembled onto four reels and shown from four projectors at events arranged by the Copenhagen experimental filmmakers. *The Deer Garden Film* has been preserved on 16 mm film in which the four pictures have been combined, two above and two below.

### Jens Otto Krag

1969 - 18 min. - B&W and colour - collective film - sound Henning Christiansen - production ABCinema.

A collage of super 8 footage of Jens Otto Krag (former Danish prime minister) from off-beat, untraditional angles, rapid pans, etc. The film plays with the portrait concept. It was shown the same way as the Deer Garden film, accompanied by a sound collage of repeated sound bites and different pieces of music. Jens Otto Krag is preserved the same way as *The Deer Garden Film* on 16 mm film.

### Without Kin (Frændeløs)

1970 - 66 min. - B&W and colour - anthology - direction Allan de Waal, Bjørn Nørgaard, Lene Adler Petersen, Per Kirkeby, Jørgen Leth, Vagn Lundbye, Peter Louis-Jensen - camera Ole John et al. - with Bjørn Nørgaard, Lene Adler Petersen et al. - music Henning Christiansen - production Per Holst, Petra Film.

Leth directed one of the six parts of this film anthology initiated by Werner Pedersen, the head of SFC (Statens Film Central, the National Film Board of Denmark, later amalgamated into the DFI). Bjørn Nørgaard and Lene Adler Petersen's celebrated "action" in which the latter walked through the Copenhagen Bourse building stark naked with a crucifix in one hand is included in the film, and in general it is a highly experimental work, typical of its time, in which each artist worked freely, using his or her own imagination and filmic methods. Leth's contribution is a black and white, frontal shot of a hippie girl talking to the camera in English about her attire and other subjects. Leth's voice is heard off screen, emphasising the artifice of the medium.

### **The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest (Dyrehaven, den romantiske skov)**

1970 - 39 min. - colour - direction, screen-play Jørgen Leth, Per Kirkeby - camera Henning Camre - sound Keld Hansen, Peter Sakse - editing Niels Schwalbe - narrator A. Tage-Jensen - music Henning Christiansen - production Laterna Film.

According to the director's synopsis *The Deer Garden, The Romantic Forest*, was intended to be a film of beauty and it fully meets this aim. It describes the changing seasons in the Royal Deer Park in pictures: summer, with the play of sunshine and clouds on the landscape, a St. John's Eve bonfire and the fair-ground lights from Bakken; then the rutting stags in autumn and red-coated huntsmen; winter with snow on the trees, skiers and children tobogganing; and finally the light green spring. A more fictional element of the film has a couple of tableaux: a naked woman strolling among the trees (summer) and a naked child in a green wilderness

(spring). Most of the shots are wide shots, usually in well-composed, fluid form, but in some cases the camera follows the deer, and a smooth travelling shot across snow-clad trees also stands out.

Without undermining what is primarily a story in pictures, the film includes a ranger who explains the history of the park and its flora and fauna in dry, matter-of-fact tones. Henning Christiansen's music, including strings, clarinet, flute and a single hummed passage, reinforces the lyrical nature of the film.

#### **Motion Picture**

1970 - 20 min. - colour - direction, screen-play Jørgen Leth, Ole John - camera Ole John - sound Peter Sakse - with Torben Ulrich, Jørgen Leth - music James Brown - production Jørgen Leth, Ole John.

*Motion Picture* is an experimental film with and not about the Danish tennis player Torben Ulrich, who is merely credited as "Example". The film may be viewed as a study of the nature of the medium and more specifically of the phenomena of framing, movement, and synchronicity of sound and picture.

The material consists of Ulrich training strokes against a wall, volleys at the net and serves, but also of strange enactments in which Ulrich runs towards the camera, arms and legs twitching, dances a crazy racket dance or fakes slow motion as he sits down at a table and pours a cup of tea. These are all studies of movement. At the same time, the framing is absolute: Ulrich moves in and out of the picture without any attempt by the camera to follow him, thus constantly emphasising the role of framing.

The complex nature of film is indicated by Jørgen Leth's short appearances as a living clapper-board for synchronizing sound and image. Jørgen Leth and Ole John ran the film through the camera several

times to create a couple of doubly-exposed scenes, and the result is the mysterious perception of several of Torben Ulrich's servings on top of one another almost as if in a choreographed dance. One last narrative element introduced several places in the film is very sparse subtitles, such as "table chair tea". At the premiere at the Carlton cinema *Motion Picture* was shown prior to François Truffaut's *L'enfant Sauvage*.

#### **Teatret i de grønne bjerge**

c.1970 - (running time unknown) - direction, camera, production Jørgen Leth.

Super 8 footage from a trip to Laos, shown unedited under this title to experimental filmmakers in Copenhagen. The film is no longer accessible.

#### **The Search (Eftersøgningen)**

1971 - 36 min. - colour - collective film based on an idea by Jørgen Leth and Ole John - script Jørgen Leth - camera Ole John - music Henning Christiansen - production Hedeselskabet af 1969 (Ann Bierlich, Henning Christiansen, Ursula Reuter Christiansen, John Davidsen, Peter Engberg, Ole John, Jørgen Leth, Vagn Lundbye, Peter Sakse, Camilla Skousen, Peter Thorsboe), ABCinema.

*The Search* is the ultimate happening film created by a group of ABCinema members during a camp on the Jutish heath.

The film consists of loosely composed sequences. The landscape is the setting for a series of peculiar occurrences in which individual members were at liberty to realize personal ideas, fantasies and themes: a man runs across the heath, shouting, a Molotov cocktail flares on a beach, a man repeatedly falls over, an angel-like woman makes a solitary procession, a burning pine,

a man breaking a tree with a shovel, etc. Several of the scenes obviously draw on religious themes but this does not mean that there is a thematic key to the film.

It was shot on 35 mm and the images have a slightly russet hue. Henning Christiansen composed a soundtrack of gloomy organ music, occasionally augmented by urban noises contrasted with the countryside. Brief pieces of text by Jørgen Leth (hand-written by Per Kirkeby) resembling fragments of a film script have been inserted between the tableaux and inspire other readings or visions: "Camouflage", "A car passes", "The sun sets or rises", "The heath is alive", "Helicopters fly across the landscape in long lines, parallel lines".

#### **Life in Denmark (Livet i Danmark)**

1972 - 37 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - camera Henning Camre - sound Leif Jensen - editing Lars Brydesen - with Kristen Bjørnkjær, Jørgen Leth, Svend Åge Madsen, Hans-Jørgen Nielsen, Feder Pedersen, Jørgen Ryg, Dan Turøll and others - music Henning Christiansen - production Laterna Film

*Life in Denmark* is a film about Denmark, as its title indicates. In it a number of Danes are invited into a black space to make small, edited versions of their own personal or professional lives. We meet a number of young unmarried women from a country town, a farmer who starts by describing his work and then has coffee and dances a waltz with his wife; a traffic cop, a political figure, a singing boy, a fishmonger. Jørgen Leth and his family appear in a number of scenes, during one of which Jørgen Leth unpacks a shopping bag.

Concurrently the film contains a number of crazier elements: four naked poets take up position in the empty space, a silent man strikes a typewriter with both hands, and the

actor Jørgen Ryg makes great play of a number of silly activities. The insanity of the purpose of the film – a catalogue of life in Denmark – is emphasised by the subtitles that continually provide an anchor for the visual content, rarely saying what one would expect.

The various scenes consist of a single camera angle from which the picture content is slowly approached via a camera movement, or several angles that move correspondingly closer to or merely show the object, such as a cyclist balancing on a bicycle, from different angles. However the camera does leave the secure confines of the studio to capture a series of postcard views of a Danish town, a wood, a country highway, and the sea, and makes a moving visit to a Copenhagen apartment. During one scene in the studio the camera suddenly swings away as if it has lost interest in the person in the picture: a filmic trick familiar from *Ophelias Flowers*. The boundless black space makes the exhibited Danes and objects seem colourful, radiant and clear.

## Chinese Ping Pong (Kinesisk bordtennis)

1972 - 14 min. - B&W and colour - direction Jørgen Leth - camera Henning Camre, Mikael Salomon - sound Finn Broby - with Stellan Bengtsson, Li Fu-Jung, Chuang Tse-Tung et al. - music Jørgen Leth - production Filmfondens og Danmarks Radio Workshop.

Film footage in black and white and colour of some of the best table tennis players in the world has been roughly assembled with no apparent attempt to present clear sequences from matches. Instead the film consists of small studies in medium shots of the playing style of various players and of full shots that enable us to enjoy a few artistic duels in full.

As the title indicates the focus is on the Chinese players. A matter-of-

fact caption relates how they returned to Western tournaments after the Cultural Revolution. In several places their superior skills are accentuated by the use of slow motion, and the subtitle swells to a description of their artistry as “moments in which the score is reduced to an informative frame-work around beauty and imagination.”

The film turns mute on several occasions, breaking the rhythm created by the sound of table tennis bat, ball and feet, and with Leth's minimalist piano improvisation it lends the film a time-dissolving, dreamlike glow. An experimental attitude to film is clearly revealed when the countdown is suddenly included, and the editing breaks up the already loose sequences still further.

## Eddy Merckx in the Vicinity of a Cup of Coffee (Eddy Merckx i nærheden af en kop kaffe)

1973 - 29 min. - black and white - TV - direction, poems Jørgen Leth - camera Jørgen Leth (super 8), Poul Andersen, Per Sønchen (TV camera) - with Jørgen Leth, Walther Godefroot, Eddy Merckx et al. - music Antonio Carlos Jobim - production Danmarks Radio (Stig Krabbe Barfoed, Charlotte Strandgaard).

With a slow introductory zoom onto Leth in a TV studio and a corresponding zoom out at the end *Eddy Merckx in the Vicinity of a Cup of Coffee* may be structured in the classical style but an extremely unusual TV production is involved: in the studio Leth reads from his poetry while a subtitle – like in *Life in Denmark* – pedantically but ambiguously presents observations and describes what is going on. The subtitles seem to serve as a medium for the director's deliberations as the TV film progresses, starting with the following manifesto: “I have no desire to save you or admonish you or get to know you. But I would like



Ole Ritter from *A Sunday in Hell*. Photo: Heine Pedersen

to try to entertain you for a while with words, sounds, and images”.

Alternating with poetry readings from the studio the second half of the film consists of moments from the 1970 Tour de France, including the cobbled roads of Northern France, from Mont Ventoux, and from the cathedral dash in Rouen, which is seen no fewer than three times. The subtitles in these sequences clearly point towards Leth's cycling films proper and the statement is made that “This is not a poem but a bit of down-to-earth truth about things I know about”. A shot of lengthy duration of a spread-out field and a pavé also points towards *A Sunday in Hell* – a piece of real time is shown passing, for example.

In the studio a peculiar device is created by which we cut from

the horizontal movements of one camera to the identical movements of the other, or similarly between two zooms onto Leth or two almost identical medium shots of him. These edits convey nothing – apart from an awareness of the possibilities of the medium.

## Stars and Watercarriers (Stjernerne og vandbærerne)

1974 - 93 min. - colour - direction, manuscript Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Ebbe Traberg, Ole Henning Larsen - editing Christian Hartkopp - with Marino Basso, José Manuel Fuente, Felice Gimondi, Eddy Merckx, Ole Ritter et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Gunner Møller Pedersen - production Minerva Film.

The images from the Tour de France in the television production *Eddy Merckx in the Vicinity of a Cup of Coffee* may be seen as a small sketch for the fully unfurled epic cycling drama *Stars and Watercarriers*. The film follows the 1973 Giro d'Italia and in his commentary Leth explains the fascination exerted by the great cycle races: "The most beautiful, most pathetic images cycling can give us involve extreme performances in classic terrain." The action literally emerges while on the move, and the riders readily assume the roles that tradition and epic necessity allocate to them, with the central conflict between the accustomed winner and voracious Belgian legend Eddy Merckx and the Spanish mountain specialist José Manuel Fuente.

*Stars and Watercarriers* is created by a small film unit that use a vivid, documentary style to describe the race from a close perspective and at times quite from within. The film consists of ten sections, each with a title such as "A road of pain" and "A peaceful day"; thus it alternates between dramatic and more peaceful passages, through which Leth's commentary leads the viewer soberly, empathetically and humorously. The chapter "The trial of truth" stands out with its focus on the Danish star Ole Ritter, his technical, physical and psychological preparations and his performance in the time trials. Ritter is lauded with words such as "power, cycle and style in the simplest manifestation possible", and aesthetically, too, the section stands out: there is no background music or ordinary real sound. Instead, a sound closeup of the chain as it seems to sing emphasising the utter concentration of Ritter's venture.

Throughout the film Gunner Møller Pedersen's music supports the dramatic and aesthetic aspects of the race and thus sets the mood. The music mimics the light tread of the mountain specialists when they are in focus and seems to indicate the beat as we watch the more powerful riders.

## Good and Evil (Det gode og det onde)

1975 - 81 min. - black and white - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Henning Camre - sound Ole Henning Hansen - editing Franz Ernst - with Diana Benneweis, Ove Brusendorff, Bent Christensen, Ann-Mari Max Hansen, Holger Juul Hansen, Hanna Holm, Bente Jensen, Lars Knutzon, Ditte Maria, Claus Nissen, Ghita Nørby, Ulf Pilgaard, Jørgen Reenberg, Ole Ritter, Elona Sjøgren, Dan Turøll, et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Gunnar Møller Pedersen - production Jørgen Leth.

An extension of *The Perfect Human*, *Good and Evil* is a longer, more expansive pseudo-documentary portrayal of life, no less. Using capacious titles or chapter headings that Leth's narrator's voice dwells upon and impresses upon us as he toys with the cliché - "Faces", "Bodies", "Things", "Necessary actions", "Unnecessary actions", "Good thoughts", "Bad thoughts", "Pleasant feelings", "Unpleasant feelings", and "Words" - the film consists of aesthetically titillating and contentually almost schematic scenes shot in the void of the film studio: faces, bodies and things. A man with a shoe. Another man with a hardboiled egg which he talks about and eats. A woman gives her husband a shirt. A couple who argue. A desperate woman. And so forth. There is no psychological shading of the characters, merely a series of sketches or examples that are as if plucked out of different everyday contexts. The thread leading back to *Life in Denmark* is thus also clear.

The dialogue is sparse and phrases or fragments of phrases recur, spoken by different actors and in different roles, which may be viewed as an accentuation of the ordinariness of these short utterances and as an awareness of language as such. Besides the professional cast and appearances by several photographic models, the

circus artiste Diana Benneweis, and the cyclist Ole Ritter, also pose in front of the camera in small tableaux. In addition to the craziness of the project the film also contains a series of zany comic acts with Claus Nissen in the lead. He bursts into song while washing his hands, dances in an empty room, plays rhythmic games with the statement "Bossa nova rhythms I have nothing against" and repeats his mysterious closing line from *The Perfect Human*: "Today, too, I had an experience ..."

The framework for the scenes is made up of a couple of visual leitmotifs by way of house fronts and landscapes. In addition a beautiful tracking shot from an avenue at dramatically appropriate moments is accompanied by one of the film's two tunes by Gunner Møller Pedersen which is sung in a girlish voice by Sanne Salomonsen. In 1999 Lars von Trier chose the film to represent Danish cinema at a number of European film festivals over a period of three years ("15 x 15: European Cinema Heritage").

## Klaus Rifbjerg

1975 - 22 min. - colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Dirk Brüel - sound Ole Henning Hansen - editing Anders Refn - with Klaus Rifbjerg - music Kasper Winding and Bukiymaz - production Minerva Film.

Klaus Rifbjerg is a portrait that has the author talking about his work in a series of tableaux. Under three major headings, "Talking easily about great things", "Standing freely on all sides" and "Being able to receive" Rifbjerg begins by talking in a consciously staged scenery seated at his desk. From then onwards he is moved around a little as he continues to pronounce a series of deliberations on writing. He poses in the dunes, in his garden, and in front of his car, and we attend a meeting with his publisher, a tennis

match, and a family luncheon. In the garden Rifbjerg also reads aloud from one of his many works.

This word-enriched film was mainly shot in full shots and very few scenes stand out. The final image, however, is a well-performed backward tracking shot showing Rifbjerg as he strides energetically along the beach in a frontal medium shot.

## The Impossible Hour (Den umulige time)

1975 - 45 min. - black and white and colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera J. M. Berasaluce - sound Ezcar Traven - editing Anders Refn - with Ole Ritter et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Keith Jarrett - production Jørgen Leth, Ib Dam, Spectrum Film.

In continuation of the time trial sequence from *Stars and Watercarriers*, *The Impossible Hour* is a concentrated study of Ole Ritter's attempt in Mexico City in 1974 to set a new record for the hour - described in the film as "the noblest, most difficult record that can be set on a bicycle". A brief retrospective in black and white sets the historical framework, with shots of Ritter and Eddy Merckx' successful record attempts in 1968 and 1972 respectively, and a few words about former record holders such as Fausto Coppi. From then on the film is in colour and with one minor exception (a training scene from a motor race track) it takes place in the relatively colourless setting of a cycle track. The film follows Ritter's three record attempts chronologically, which, accompanied by a Mexican marching band on the bandstand, all fail.

There are several interview situations in hand-held reportage style in which Ritter is surrounded by a group of reporters and gives his account of the attempts, plus other shots from the inner circle of the cycle track. When Ritter is riding

he is captured from a motorcycle moving round the track or we follow him (during the record attempts) in long pans all the way round the track. The only notable visual device is the slow motion used to accentuate Ritter's style in a couple of places, accompanied by a piano theme, with Leth's words on the soundtrack: "The functional mastery of power is an aesthetic experience". Throughout the film Leth talks soberly and informatively about cycling technique, the advantages of the thin air in Mexico City, Ritter's gradual acquisition of his average speed and rhythm, the progress of the record attempts, etc.

### A Sunday in Hell (En forårsdag i Hælvede)

1977 - 111 min. - colour - *direction, screenplay* Jørgen Leth - *camera* Dan Holmberg, Dirk Brüel, Jan Weincke, Paul Constantini, Ron Goodman, Peter Klitgård, Henning Camre, Peter Roos, Teit Jørgensen et al. - *sound* devisor Ole Ørsted - *editing* Lars Brydesen - with Marc Demeyer, Freddy Maertens, Eddy Merckx, Ole Ritter, Roger de Vlaeminck et al. - *narrator* Jørgen Leth - *music* Gunner Møller Pedersen - *producer* Christian Clausen - *production* Steen Herdel Film.

This at once empathetic, mythological approach to cycle racing (with a shift towards a simpler narration) is the same as that of *Stars and Watercarriers*, but for *A Sunday in Hell* Jørgen Leth had more than 20 camera units and a helicopter at his disposal. The film follows the French Paris-Roubaix spring classic, notorious for the hellish paved or cobbled roads of the north "which are no longer used for civilised traffic but only for transporting cattle - and for cycle races". We are there from the dawn preparations and rituals on the outskirts of Paris and through the rigours of the race with special focus on a number of prominent cyclists to the final outcome on the Roubaix cycle track - followed by



Haiti. Untitled. Photo: Jørgen Leth

the filthy riders taking their showers. There is also an eye for life among the spectators and the media event as such.

The chronology is maintained as a basic principle; for this reason the large number of cameramen had to film their wrist-watches before each shot. The film alternates between different kinds of shots with the idea of establishing the most suitable viewpoint of the narrative: shots from motorcycles, which are able to convey the motion of the race and provide closeups of the riders in the style of television cycle race reporting; fixed cameras stationed at strategically important points along the route, where viewers can watch riders passing in real time and thus gain a clear overview of the distance between the leaders and the main field; and the Olympian eye of the helicopter shots.

Gunner Møller Pedersen's music and the very lively accompanying sound enhance the drama, and members of the chorus of the Royal Danish Opera use the words "Paris - Roubaix - L'enfer du nord" to add a patina of the sublime. The images of the riders on the misshapen

cobble-stones in enormous clouds of dust deserve emphasis as some of the most powerful images ever captured from the world of cycling.

### Peter Martins: A Dancer (Peter Martins - en danser)

1979 (New York 1978) - 54 min. - colour - *direction* Jørgen Leth - *camera* Dan Holmberg - *sound* Jan Juhler - *editing* Franz Ernst - with Peter Martins, George Balanchine, Suzanne Farrell, Jerome Robbins, Heather Watts, Stanley Williams, et al. - *music* Claude Debussy, C. W. Gluck, Charles Ives, Igor Stravinsky, Piotr Tchaikovsky - *narrator* Jørgen Leth - *production* Filmselskabet v. Ole John & Jørgen Leth.

*Peter Martins - A Dancer* is a classical documentary which uses illustrative visuals, interviews with the subject, and a linking narrative voice-over to paint a portrait of the Danish ballet star with the New York City Ballet.

"I cannot deal with second best people", the handsome, self-assured Martins says, describing himself as a highly ambitious man who is however able to regard his work as a continual learning process. The film

follows Martins as a dancer and choreographer, primarily in the rehearsal room but also on stage. It is made quite clear that the New York City Ballet is where the greatest dancers gather, and we meet them in the film; and Martins must accept that here the real star is choreography itself.

In the voice over Leth introduces Balanchine's observations on the body as an instrument, which in ballet is used as a means of artistic expression, a key to the film as a visual exploration of dance.

Concentrated closeups of faces, hands and feet alternate with larger, registering shots that give an impression of the dynamic choreographic effort through the elegant mobility of the camera work. In the sequences from performances the shots are frontal by nature, with the camera as the stand-in for the audience.

### Kalule (Kalule)

1979 - 57 min. Colour - *direction, screenplay* Jørgen Leth - *camera* Peter Roos, Mikael Salomon - *with* Ayub Kalule, Børge Krogh, Richard Palladin, Sugar Ray Seales, Jørgen

Hansen, et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - production Ebbe Preisler Film/TV.

The film portrays Ayub Kalule, the boxer from Uganda who was "the most famous guest worker in Denmark" in the late 1970s. The film opens on a deserted, floodlit boxing ring, and on the soundtrack the buzz of the spectators can be heard. Then Kalule is introduced by the narrator, and the film comprises four blocks: an interview with the subject, scenes from the gym (including an interview with trainer Børge Krogh) and extensive reports from Kalule's two bouts in 1977 and 1978 against the powerful Americans Palladin and Seales. In the fourth, final block Sugar Ray Seales talks about his defeat by Kalule and the latter's prospects in the ring.

The two dramatic bouts are shot by two cameras from low, close angles by the ringside. Leth comments on the visuals in a matter-of-fact narrative in continuation of the acute, sober commentary to *A Sunday in Hell*.

## Dancing Bournonville (At danse Bournonville)

1979 - 52 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - manuscript Ole John - consultant Ebbe Mørk - camera Dan Holmberg (Peter Klitgaard, Mikael Salomon, Jan Weincke) - sound Niels Bokkenheuser - editing Anders Refn - with Ib Andersen, Hans Brenaa, Mette-Ida Kirk, Henning Kronstam, Kirsten Ralov, Flemming Ryberg et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music H. S. Paulli - production Filmselskabet v. Ole John & Jørgen Leth.

*Dancing Bournonville* is a portrait of the Bournonville tradition at the Royal Danish ballet that has survived for 150 years on the basis of a few notes and the memories of the dancers, and is the basis of the special nature and global reputation the company enjoys. The film was created in continuation of, and drawing on, Leth and Holmberg's experience in

making *Peter Martins - A Dancer*. It primarily concentrates on the work of the charming, affected Hans Brenå in rehearsal and on stage with two young dancers in a production of Bournonville's 'Kermessen i Brügge'. The film focuses on learning the steps and the gestures, as the combination of the two is what the Bournonville tradition emphasises. The film also includes excerpts from 'Conservatoriet' and 'Napoli'.

The camera work is attentive, mobile and occasionally very close to the dancers. Frontal full shots are also used, often with pans, to show the dance in full, especially on stage. Leth's narrative describes the Bournonville tradition in a sober, poetic tone; for example "A new landscape, a new sky, different moods are lowered from the flies". The Royal Danish Ballet is described as "a workshop for dance where the quality of the old steps needs honing and refining every single day".

## A Midsummer's Play (Sanct Hansaften-Spil)

1979 - 98 min. - colour - TV - direction Jørgen Leth - words: Adam Oehlenschläger - cameras (TV) Arne Jespersen, Mogens Larsen, Svend Aage Madsen - sound Ebbe Valbjørn - sets, costumes Per Kirkeby - with Flemming Enevold, Ole Ernst, Paul Hagen, Martin Hansen, Frits Helmuth, Erik Mørk, Finn Nielsen, Ghita Nørby, Per Pallesen, Kirsten Peüliche, Elin Reimer, Ove Sprogøe, Helle Merete Sørensen, Lily Weiding, Preben Lerdorff Rye, et al. - music Emil Reesen, Henning Christiansen - production Danmarks Radio (Ole Reim).

Leth's television production of *A Midsummer's Play* by the Danish playwright Adam Oehlenschläger is an attempt to take the poetic play at face value and bring it to life in a series of tableaux with settings by Per Kirkeby and performances by a large number of celebrated actors and actresses. In other words, just as in the theatre, the attempt means making the words burst out of the narrow framework

of the stage or tableau.

Apart from the central romance between Maria and Ludvig, several of the images and tableaux from this TV production deserve praise for giving body and soul to Oehlenschläger's words in an enjoyable, moving way: Ghita Nørby and Per Pallesen as puppets, Ove Sprogøe as the blind man longing for his fiddle, and Erik Mørk as Death.

The visuals are kept in warm colours or as bluish, murky sets emphasising the mystery of the woods. This is a multi-camera production typical of television with extensive use of dissolves. Within this technological framework at one point Leth produces a more experimental scene, using two cameras that take turns to make long zooms onto Frits Helmuth, who is seated beside a spring, talking. Whenever the zoom reaches medium shot it dissolves to a new, almost identical zoom from a full shot. A similar game with the possibilities allowed by television production is to be found in *Eddy Merckx in the Vicinity of a Cup of Coffee*.

## Step on Silence (Step on Silence)

1981 - 58 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Jan Jubler - editing Kristian Levring - with Suzanne Farrell, Peter Martins, Jerome Robbins, Stanley Williams et al. - music Claude Debussy, C. W. Gluck, Charles Ives, H.S. Paulli, Piotr Tchaikovsky - production Filmselskabet v. Ole John & Jørgen Leth.

*Step on Silence* was made from raw material from *Peter Martins - A Dancer* but unlike the traditional way the Martin's film communicates its material, in this case, we have a film that with its slightly dusty, scratchy appearance makes room for all the shots originally discarded for technical or narrative reasons.

It fades to black and up again if visual material is lacking at any given moment, for example, while the

continuity of the soundtrack is maintained. The establishing by the cameraman of a new frame or focus is not edited out for the sake of appearances. The painstaking repetitions from the rehearsal room are captured by showing several takes of the same detail from the dance one after the other. Leth's notes in white handwriting on a black background serve as small, conciliatory transitions from scene to scene.

*Step on Silence* gives a uniquely free, very passionate treatment of the work of the New York City Ballet's creative workshop as a counter to the "kill your darlings" philosophy of the film world.

## 66 Scenes from America (66 scener fra Amerika)

1982 - 42 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Ole John - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Morning Pastorok, Jan Jubler - editing Kristian Levring - with Kim Larsen, Andy Warhol et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Erik Satie (piano Aldo Ciccolini) - production John & Leth Film.

As a visual narrative *66 Scenes From America* is reminiscent of a pile of postcards from a journey, which indeed is what the film is. It consists of a series of lengthy shots of a tableau nature, each appearing to be a more or less random cross section of American reality, but which in total invoke a highly emblematic picture of the USA.

With the one tracking shot (through a car windscreens) and a single pan (across a landscape) the tableau principle is only breached on two occasions; exceptions that prove the rule, so to speak. The images or postcards may be viewed as a number of interlaced chains of motifs, varying from ultra closeup to super full shot, include images of landscapes, highways and advertising hoardings, buildings seen from without, mostly with a fluttering Stars and Stripes somewhere in the

shot, objects such as coins on a counter, refrigerator with a number of typical food products, a plate of food at a diner or a bottle of Wild Turkey, and finally, people who introduce themselves (and sometimes the content of their lives in rough-hewn form) facing the camera: for example, the New York cabbie or the celebrities Kim Larsen and Andy Warhol.

The film actually consists of 75 shots but in some cases several shots combine in one scene, thus ending on sixty six. Each scene is delimited by the narrator; at the end of each shot he pins down the picture content, often by a simple indication of time or place, but in some cases more playfully, often shifting our perception in a surprising fashion. Similarly the sound closeups in some scenes are intended to alter the viewer's immediate interpretation of the picture content, while the mood-creating or interpretive use of Erik Satie's 'Gnossiennes (No. 5)' provides the final component of the film.

## Pelota (Pelota)

1983 - 47 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Ebbe Traberg, Klaus Rifbjerg, Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg (Ole John, Xavier) - stills Georg Oddner - sound Morning Pastorok, Niels Arild Nielsen - editing Franz Ernst - with Atano III, Berasaluce IV, Jean-Pierre Laduche, Joseph Laduche, Retegui II, Cipriano Ruiz, et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Ennio Morricone - producer Ole John - production John & Leth Film.

A classical documentary about pelota, the Basque ball game. The film consists of several elegantly interlaced layers - with the manufacture of a pelota ball as the narrative framework. We are introduced to the sport today, concentrating on the current master, Retegui II, on a father teaching his young son, and on a game with the bookmakers' eager involvement on

the side lines. The component of the film typical of Leth's attitude to the sport is obviously the story of the mysterious player Atano III - in the visuals an old man, on the soundtrack renowned for "his electric speed and feline suppleness". Finally, the Basque struggle simmers beneath the surface by way of a series of stills of bullet-riddled road signs and painted-over place names.

The basic mood of the film is melancholy, not only due to the narrator's emphasis on former pelota feats but also thanks to the rainy weather, grey and green hues of the visuals and the musical theme by Ennio Morricone on the soundtrack.

## Haiti Express (Udenrigskorrespondenten)

1983 - 93 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Jørgen Leth, Klaus Rifbjerg - camera Alexander Gruszynski - sound Jan Juhler - editing Kristian Levring - with Henning Jensen, Hanne Uldal, Roberto D'Aubuisson, Aubelin Jolicoeur, François Latour, Jocasta Maspuda, Gérard Résil, Al Seitz, et al. - narrator Joseph Bentz - music Fuzzy - producer Vibke Windelov - production HTM Film.

*Haiti Express* was Leth's first feature but must be regarded as an experiment in fiction rather than an action film in the usual sense.

Alex Hansen (Henning Jensen) is a peripatetic correspondent and at the start of the film is on an assignment in civil-war-ravaged El Salvador. He cannot sleep and is suffering from writer's block, and goes to Haiti, where he bumps into and falls in love with a Danish woman (Hanne Uldal). However, she disappears, and instead of obtaining an interview with Baby Doc, Alex searches for her haphazardly while he goes more and more to the dogs. At the end of the film a quotation from "Interferens", a poem by Johannes V. Jensen, expresses Alex's

desperation in words, but only when he has severed connections to his justifiably impatient editor in Denmark is he able to abandon himself to Haitian sensuality and dance in the streets of Port-au-Prince by way of release.

Alex's gradual dissolution is reflected by the dramaturgy of the film. Hence *Haiti Express* seems far more unfocused than traditional film narratives and seems imbued by faith in the random principle with its loose fiction in a kind of documentary framework. A questioning, puzzled voice-over narrator also struggles with the unexplained components of the film, trying to understand Alex's thoughts and emotions, which are otherwise only reflected by his restless behaviour.

A hectic, documentary feel in the El Salvador section gives way to calmer visuals in Haiti. The camerawork becomes lingering and is often composed in several spatial planes (this also goes for the soundtrack) and there is extensive use of restrained, smooth camera movements. The altogether warm colours and handsome, sparsely-lit night scenes create a sultry, claustrophobic atmosphere that describes Alex's crisis.

## The Yellow Jersey (The Yellow Jersey)

1986 - incomplete feature - colour - second unit director Jørgen Leth - camera Jean-Yves Lemener, Philippe Ros, et al. - production Gary Mehlman, John Veitch, Cannon Pictures.

In summer 1986 Jørgen Leth and a large, well-equipped, competent French film unit were responsible for shooting a large amount of documentary material from the Tour de France for a U.S. feature, *The Yellow Jersey*, which was to use the great French cycle race as a living set. The fictional side of the film, based on a novel by Ralf Herne and with draft scripts by Carl Foreman

and Colin Welland, was never made, and the documentary footage is embargoed in a bankruptcy case in the U.S.A. Jørgen Leth described events in his book on the Tour de France, *The Yellow Jersey in the High Mountains*.

## Moments of Play (Det legende menneske)

1986 - 82 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Jørgen Leth (Mogens Rukov) - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp - editing Camilla Skousen, Kristian Levring - with Torben Ulrich, Christian Uldal-Leth, Antonio Carlos Jobim, et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Antonio Carlos Jobim - producer Hanne Uldal - production Leth & Uldal Productions, LEGO Gruppen.

*Moments of play* is a visually rich travelogue from Bali, Brazil, England, Haiti, Spain and the U.S.A., with a couple of scenes from China originally shot for *Notebook from China*, and a number of scenes with Leth's children in Denmark.

Under thematic intermediate titles such as "Exploring, investigating reality" and "Being in another world, dreaming", the nine sections of the film present themselves as a series of loosely linked scenes or observations, with the clear point that play is a cross-cultural phenomenon and a human condition, not something naïve or childish that we grow out of. With Dan Holmberg's sensitive cinematography the film brings us close to the many manifestations of play, and on the soundtrack Antonio Carlos Jobim's music communicates the warm fundamental tone of the film while Jørgen Leth's voice talks vividly about play and intones the poem "Jeg er klar nu" ("I'm ready now", red.), which may be seen as a personal approach to poetry. It includes the words "I play, I can do anything. Nothing is forbidden. I create my own world. I systematize chaos. I keep a balance as long as I think it is worth keeping".

## Notebook from China (Notater fra Kina)

1987 - 79 min. - colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp - editing Rumle Hammerich (Janus Billeskov Jansen, Vinca Wiedemann) - narrator Jørgen Leth - production Leth & Uldal Productions, World Pacific Pictures.

In 1984 Jørgen Leth, cinematographer Dan Holmberg and sound recordist Niels Torp travelled some 6,000 kilometres by train through China. The result is a very calm, beautifully perceived travelogue borne by unprejudiced curiosity and observational ability.

A riverboat in a landscape of sugar-top mountains in Southern China and the many shots from the train journey are the visual leitmotifs of the film, in which we meet an acrobat, a painter in inks, some opera students from the Beijing conservatory, and a group of female racing cyclists. The camera falls in love with exquisite tai chi movements and the dexterity of the train kitchen staff, and the soundtrack gives a vivid sense of the noisy life on board, with music blaring from scratchy loudspeakers. The fact that the film should be viewed as a collection of notes on film, i.e. a kind of travel journal, is emphasised by the title and by Leth's only words on the soundtrack: "I take notes because I want to remember what I have seen. I am smoking a Chinese cigarette and I am travelling on board a train in China". (In an English version of the film, which is nineteen minutes shorter, a further three notes appear on the soundtrack).

## Composer Meets Quartet (Composer Meets Quartet)

1987 - 28 min. - colour - video - direction Jørgen Leth - cinematographer Dan Holmberg - camera Dirk Brüel, Palle Hansen, Jeppe

Jeppesen - sound Bjarne Horsbøl, Troels Orland - editing Ann Bierlich - with Herman D. Koppel, Knud W. Jensen, the Cantilena Piano Quartet (Frank Glazer, Edna Michell, Philipp Naegele, Paul Olefsky) - music Herman D. Koppel, Carl Nielsen - production Casper Thorsøe Video Production, The Danish Music Information Center.

The video production *Composer Meets Quartet* provides an insight into the work by composer and pianist Herman D. Koppel with the American Cantilena Quartet before the first performance of his piano quartet 'opus 114' in 1986. The film was shot at Louisiana, the museum of modern art north of Copenhagen, which serves as a setting literally rich in images, and the director and founder of the museum, Knud W. Jensen, talks briefly about Louisiana and what art means to man. Herman D. Koppel also plays a piano piece by Carl Nielsen - conveyed in the film as a study in fingers dancing on the keys.

The video is mainly in closeups of the faces and hands of the players and the camera is restrained, zooming to follow tiny movements in the picture. The camera also goes exploring among the museum collections, and not least in the beautiful sculpture park on the coast.

## Notes on Love (Notater om kærligheden)

1989 - 90 min. - B&W and colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Jørgen Leth (Ann Bierlich, Jonas Cornell) - camera Henning Camre, Dan Holmberg - sound Per Meinertsen, Per Streit - editing Camilla Skousen - sets Per Kirkeby - with Lars Damsgaard, Stina Ekblad, Peter Eszterhás, Edith Guillaume, Linda Hindberg, Mette-Ida Kirk, Jørgen Leth, Claus Nissen, Jan Nowicki, Baard Owe, Charlotte Sieling, Hanne Uldal, Arne Villumsen et al. - music Frédéric Chopin, Carl Czerny, H. S. Løvenskiold, W. A. Mozart, Franz Schubert - producer Vibeke Windeløv - production Jørgen Leth Productions, Columbus Film.

Jørgen Leth made *Notes on Love* during a crisis in his life and it is a

sombre, perhaps very personal film. The tone is struck by Leth's voice, which accompanies a shot of him shaving at the start of the film with the word 'Repugnance'. The actors are used as properties in the loosely conjoined, sketch-like scenes, and a series of simple themes reappear from *Good and Evil*, of which this film lies clearly in continuation: house fronts behind which people live, smoking a cigarette, and perhaps the most important theme of the film: Touch. Other important moods or emotions include restlessness, indecisiveness, and more tangibly a writer's block, with which Leth's alter ego in the film, Claus Nissen, struggles (in a set built of bricks by Per Kirkeby). Nissen also takes up his character from *The Perfect Human* and *Good and Evil* in several scenes.

In a loose structure kept together by several recurrent motifs such as a large tree lit at night, a canoe gliding along a river in the twilight, and its music, the film also contains other blocks of material, including ballet scenes shot in the studio and a number of affectionate images of a woman and her daughter in Nicaragua. The documentary material from the Trobriand Islands makes the most marked impression: A staged layer mimicking the anthropologist Malinowski's black and white photographs from the islands, and the story of the Danish film unit following in Malinowski's footsteps, again seeking tangible documentation of the nature of love.

## Danish Literature (Dansk litteratur)

1989 - 44 min. - colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - literary consultant Asger Schnack - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp, Per Meinertsen - editing Camilla Skousen - with Inger Christensen, Per Højolt, Erik Knudsen, Peter Laugesen, Svend Åge Madsen, Erik Mørk, Ulf Pilgaard, Birgitte Price, Jørgen Reenberg, Klaus Rifbjerg, Preben

Lerdorff Rye, Peter Seeberg - music Herman D. Koppel (cello Troels Svane Hermansen) - production Columbus Film.

Jørgen Leth's personal, pleasurable distillation of Danish literature covers seven poets living at the time of production and twenty classical poets. A handful of actors share readings of the classical texts in medium shots against a dark background; the living poets read their own works. One untraditional choice is that the living poets are only heard, while the screen shows their silent portraits shot in their own settings.

The visuals also consist of landscape paintings and portraits of the classical poets, filmic landscapes, and more specifically a series of pictures of Danish landscapes shot from a train window during "the golden hour". Herman D. Koppel composed a series of short pieces for the cello for the soundtrack.

## Traberg (Traberg)

1992 - 91 min. - colour - direction Jørgen Leth - screenplay Jørgen Leth (Jonas Cornell, Asger Schnack) - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp (Jan Juher, Pamela Yates) - editing Camilla Skousen - with Ebbe Traberg, Ambroise Thompson, Jean-Claude Dicquemare, Pio Lindegaard, Lunise Morse, Jocelyne Mondésir, Aubelin Jolicoeur, Yvrodie Jean Baptiste, Mikel Berasaluce, et al. - narrator Erik Mørk - music Nat King Cole, Robbie Robertson, et al. - producer Marianne Christensen - production Jørgen Leth Productions.

*Traberg*, like *Haiti Express*, is an experiment in fiction consisting of placing a character or a fictional sketch into a set of surroundings and seeing what happens. Moreover, for most of the film the surroundings are the same, namely the chaotic reality of Haiti. Ebbe Traberg plays Traberg, a mystical character who is not explained in a psychological way and whose

seemingly covert activities are only hinted at in pictures. We follow him from a couple of locations in Northern Spain (which the genuine Traberg was attached to, including the pelotafrontóns of the Pays Basques) to Haiti, where the film changes character. A narrator comes clean right from the start: "I didn't know where it would lead me. It was this thing about my old friend Traberg. I wanted to tell a simple story. But it was harder than I thought". The difficulty with the fictional story is that the genuine events (a military coup and the inauguration of Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president in 1991) are so intrusive that the narrator pretty much loses interest in Traberg and works in a hectic documentary style instead, although in the closing shots a resolution of the Traberg story is hinted at.

The film also contains several detached scenes from Haiti, including sensual, dark dance shots, a series of adages pronounced by an elderly gentleman, conveyed by fading up and down, a girl bringing cocktails for the film crew at the Hotel Oloffsen, etc. This material points clearly forward in time to *Haiti. Untitled*, in which Leth gives up the fictional framework entirely and devotes himself to his fascination for Haiti.

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### **Michael Laudrup: A Football Player (Michael Laudrup - en fodboldspiller)**

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1993 - 74 min. - colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp - editing Camilla Skousen - with Michael Laudrup, Johan Cruyff et al. - narrator Jørgen Leth - music Randall Meyers - producer Ib Tardini - production Zentropa Entertainments/Saloprint, Sunset Productions.

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With a title parallel to the portrait of ballet dancer Peter Martins, this is also a conventional film portrait, this

time of football star Michael Laudrup at the height of his career with the F.C. Barcelona dream team.

The film follows Laudrup and his team during training and in matches as they successfully defended their Spanish league championship in spring 1993. Laudrup and the team manager Johan Cruyff present their philosophy of football. From the wheel of his car as he drives through Barcelona Laudrup talks about himself and his career, and a number of fans are allowed to describe his qualities as a player. The game is shown by 16 mm footage from the side line, by the use of tempo changes emphasising the ballet-like aspect of Laudrup's movements, and in television footage filmed from the screen as documentation of Laudrup's achievements as a player, as shown here first and foremost by way of goals. The film seems a touch unstructured but it starts and ends with F.C. Barcelona winning the Spanish championships.

Dan Holmberg provides a series of atmospheric images from the Catalonian capital which are used as intermissions for thought, and in a highly poetic scene deserving separate mention he filmed Laudrup's (staged) ball play with his two young sons in a gapingly empty stadium.

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### **Haïti. Untitled (Haïti. Uden titel)**

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1996 (Amsterdam 1995) - 78 min. - colour - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Tómas Gislason, Alexander Gruszynski, Dan Holmberg, Jørgen Leth - stills Chantal Regnault, Henrik Saxgren - sound Jens Danielsen (Dino Raymond Hansen, Jan Juhler, Mikala Krogh, Niels Arnt Torp, Majka Bjørnager) - editing Camilla Skousen, Jacob Thuesen - with Chantal Regnault, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Raoul Cédras, Toto Constant, Franck Romain, Sophie Destin, et al. - music Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, Carlos Gardel et al. - producer Dino Raymond Hansen - production Sunset Productions, The Danish Film Workshop.

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*Haïti. Untitled* is a kaleidoscopic, dramatic documentary from this chaotic Caribbean country and comprises a mixture of material on video, 16 mm and 35 mm, dating in some scenes right back to the shootings on Leth's *Haiti Express* in 1982. The very lively hand-held video sequences that make up the most recent material make up the bulk of the film and the rapid, fragmentary editing style garnished with neat video tricks, gunfire, etc. equates the film with the Haitian chaos itself.

The French photographer Chantal Regnault plays Leth's role as the "protagonist", an observer in the midst of the dramatic reality of Haiti which she also describes with an outsider's fascination. The film contains a large number of very powerful, sensual pictures of life and death in Haiti, the heartrending weeping at the funerals, mountains of refuse picturesquely and infernally aflame, the dramatic manifestations and ritual beauty of voodoo, the rhetoric of the politicians, and far more besides. Another angle is pursued in the scenes of the American soldier stationed there who clearly represents the impotence of Western rationalism in the face of Haitian reality. But there are also great contrasts: in perfectly calm passages the tropical rain pours down on the Hotel Oloffson's garden in lingering shots, lightly-attired women wash clothes in a river, and a naked woman poet recites one of her poems draped in a basket chair as the camera slowly zooms in on her. Shots of a naked black woman on a white sheet offer highly personal erotic material that is also displayed during the film in ultra-brief, hidden pictures.

*Haïti. Untitled* is thus a dynamic, vigorous visual narrative aesthetically akin to a number of contemporary documentaries such as Tómas Gislason's portrait of Leth *From the Heart to the Hand* (1996), and Jacob Thuesen's *Under New York*.

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### **I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen: A Danish Poet (Jeg er levende - Søren Ulrik Thomsen, digter)**

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1999 - 40 min. - B&W - direction, screenplay Jørgen Leth - camera Dan Holmberg - sound Niels Arnt Torp - editing Camilla Skousen - with Søren Ulrik Thomsen - music Krzysztof Komeda (Tomasz Stanko Septet), Randall Meyers - producer Annette Nørregaard - production managers Marianne Christensen, Ulrik Wivel - production Peter Bech Film.

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With films like *The Perfect Human* and *Good and Evil* in mind the consistent black and white portrait film *I'm Alive. Søren Ulrik Thomsen. A Danish Poet* gives the impression that Søren Ulrik Thomsen has been invited into Leth's filmic universe, which conversely allows room for the poet's words. Thomsen gives an account of brief memories of childhood in a deliberately "staged" fashion, but more particularly of his experience of writing and on the art of reading aloud, and likewise describing poetry in general as a balance between emotion and cognition. He also reads some of his work aloud.

The readings take place in the empty white space of the film studio whereas the rest of the footage of Thomsen was shot in his flat, which the camera studies in a series of shots as a peculiar, private world. Particularly notable are the poet's tea ritual, described in calm close-ups, accompanied by Randall Meyers' music (recycled from *Michael Laudrup - A Football Player*). A third layer is provided by Dan Holmberg's atmospheric observations from Copenhagen (stills and 16 mm) accompanied by a recent recording of Krzysztof Komeda's theme from *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968).

*I'm Alive* is a calm, well-composed, moving filmic portrait ■

# LIFE THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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BY JØRGEN LETH

Frame. Look at things. Turn up your nose. Screw up your eyes. It does not look good. It may be better soon. Frame. This is life. It is not as it should be. It lacks talent. It is ugly. Can we do anything to it? Can we make it look better? Okay is not good enough.

It's a matter of framing, of choosing. Of framing time and space. Defining what is inside and what is outside and the precise place and perspective of the object within the frame.

We once made a film about the perfect human being. In the film we removed anything unnecessary from the room. We were left with an empty room. Into the room we put what was necessary: A human being, a few actions, a few elementary things, a salmon with potatoes and Hollandaise sauce. Good wine in the glass. It was enough – objects under a microscope.

We continued this project for a number of years.

We wanted to create order amidst chaos. We made a series of films examining life

through the looking glass. In a film about life in Denmark we peeled away even more. We did not want rain and social realist mess. Life in Denmark was to stand forth as clearly as a relief. An enamel surface.

Emblematic.

We chiseled details. We wrote a scripture.

In a film on good and evil we went a step farther by creating order. Life was split into categories. We put faces, actions, feelings and words into boxes. The crazy anthropologist at work.

Many years later we set off into the world, to a South Sea island, to make notes on love. We came up against nature. The exotic. But we had decided to reduce the tyranny of greenness – “all that green cabbage” as Henning Camre described it – by shooting in black and white. In order to control reality still further we set up a screen behind the characters.

Framing and filling in. The stage was set. Life could merely step in and unfurl with all its peculiarities right there. In manageable fragments.

A frown. Nature? Hmm ... Well, we will just have to put up with it. The light. The light. Not

circa, but precisely right. Surgical microscopy. Framing time. A spring day north of Paris. Capturing the passing of time. Setting a trap for the drama. Getting ready. Waiting. A cloud of dust moves across the landscape. The dust settles. The riders pass. We wait again. New wandering dust clouds. Framing. Dispensing time.

PS: film is a series of images that have been put together. Not a sequence, not a story, but a series of images, quite simply. The order they are in is less important than the individual image. That is that ■

*(Notes for a speech on the occasion of Henning Camre's 60th birthday, first published in FILM # 1)*

*Henning Camre is currently Chief Executive of the Danish Film Institute and a former cinematographer. Director of photography on the following films by Jørgen Leth: The Perfect Human (1967); Ophelia's Flowers (1968); The Deer Garden, the Romantic Forest (1970); Life in Denmark (1971); Chinese Ping Pong (1972); Good and Evil (1975); Notes on Love (1989).*

# ENCY-CLOPAEDIA

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## EDIT

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An edit leads from one space to another. An edit can bring sense to unruly, chaotic material, perhaps rendering it too sensible. Or it may breathe life into something dull. Editing means combining, i.e. imposing yourself on the individual image. Some people aim to edit stories into existence. Others want to preserve the raw power of the material. For some people the process starts at the editing table; for others editing is just a way of putting the material into order. It's like a trip to the barber: do you want a lot off or just a trim? Whoever undertakes the final cut often possesses the controversial right to define the story.

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## PAN

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The landscape is drawn through the field of vision: the billowing sands of the Sahara in optically deceptive light, with the present leaving the frame from the left and the future and comprehension entering it from the right. James Stewart kisses a woman who looks just like a woman who died; the image moves disturbingly into a memory of the woman he once kissed. Pans reveal associations.

Some choose frame and tempo. Others choose what the eye may see. A pan must be an almost imperceptible progression from left to right. Unfortunately many people suffer from a compulsion that the camera must move. There is no such natural law. Static images are the best. Pans are displacements of the chosen frame. Very rarely are pans so ingeniously conceived and contrived that they may be described as well motivated. Mostly pans are evidence of a tourist-like enthusiasm for the surroundings or merely a reflection of a kind of anxiety in the face of a steady picture.

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## RAW STOCK

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Raw stock is unexposed film. It lives in black paper in metal cans. The assistant cameraman sits down quietly in a corner with his black changing bag and puts the cartridge with the exposed reel and an empty can into the bag. He gazes into thin air without seeing anything, his hands busy in the bag. He pulls out the can of exposed film. He seals it with tape. He puts the new film in. The cartridge emerges and is put into the camera. The cameraman is now ready to expose some more film, i.e. to subject the raw stock to light. Life will be imprinted on the

fresh reel. Human movements, the blurred or sharp content of the room will be scribed onto the film. The raw stock will be transformed into exposed negative. Raw stock is highly tangible and magical. All hope may be attached to raw stock. It contains every possibility. The unused film contains the fantasy of furtive signals, unknown meanings. Raw stock rests in a wrapping unsullied by script, set, calculation or zeal.

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## SEEING

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A father tells his son as he sets out on his first journey abroad: "Remember to use your eyes, son." His son is to use his eyes to enable him to see. He mustn't forget to see. He must experience the world through his eyes, his vision. The lad sets off into the world and looks around. He does as his father told him. He sees and notes what he sees. He forms impressions. He discovers that the world is full of images and meaning. He tries to understand it. Each time he arrives home from a trip he tells his father what he has seen. He collects his impressions and shows them off. He decides he will continue to use his eyes throughout his whole life.

Seeing means choosing a par-

ticular lens. Through our lens we frame a section of life. We can stare into space without seeing a thing. We can see a slice of our world on the table in front of us. We can see individual objects: an empty cup, some sheets of paper, a ballpoint, a packet of Marlborough. We see a few words on the page. We can compose our own nature morte. Or we can go out and gather impressions from chaos. The world consists of what we see. We may see a link, an image. Or perhaps we cannot set our eyes on anything that makes an imprint on our retinas. We can choose a view. The inventory of a situation may seem perfectly comprehensible, but sometimes we will not be able to focus on individual components.

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## ZOOM

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Zoom is a disease. You have a picture but you do not want it. You want to change it. You constantly want to change it. It has got to be bigger. Then it has got to be smaller. The frame is fluid. Indecisiveness has become a technique. Choice has been postponed forever.

Jørgen Leth  
(From "Brøndum's Encyclopedia")